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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF A BOMB: INDIA AND THE ONTOLOGY OF AN "OVERPOPULATED" SOCIETY

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Professor Sanjay Dhande, Director, IIT-Kanpur

We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms, we rank No. 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's Human Development Index. More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, over 600 million lack even basic sanitation and about 200 million have no safe drinking water. A nuclear bomb isn't going to improve any of this. . . . India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people. However many garlands we heap on our scientists, however many medals we pin to their chests, the truth is that it's far easier to make a bomb than to educate 400 million people.

Arundhati Roy, "The End of Imagination"

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In the literature about the Indian nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998, analyses that give priority to security threats, alliance politics, arms races, and related explanations from within the domains of security studies and international relations have jostled with others who accord primacy to the anxieties and insecurities of a postcolonial middle class that is tired of being ignored and belittled in the world comity of nations. One might describe this as a debate between security-centered explanations versus status-centered explanations for the Indian decision to nuclearize. While the former genre of explanation often has a difficult time squaring up to the fact that there were no imminent security threats from familiar regional adversaries—China and Pakistan—nor was there any dramatic deterioration in a wider geopolitical sense to which either set of tests could be seen as a response, the latter explanations are inherently "soft," making it difficult to establish with any finality the causal links between a perceived sense of ressentiment and the decision to test the bombs. The differing emphases in these two modes of explanation for Indian nuclearism will likely endure for some time, as they represent fairly divergent epistemologies in understanding social reality.[1] This paper locates itself within the latter genre of explanations for Indian nuclearism. Its focus is trained on the distinctive evolution of a colonial middle class, its science and insecurities, as the primary factors in the emergence of India as a nuclear weapons state in contemporary times.

A significant number of Indians—both within and outside the governing elites—see the bomb redressing a disjuncture between India's actual status in the comity of the world's nations and its desired or deserved status. Critical to this disjunction is the idea that India is an overpopulated society. Many middle-class Indians believe that they are not given due respect and appreciation for what they have accomplished, because their attainments are literally drowned in a sea of humanity. The bomb, therefore, is not only an entity within an economy of threats, security concerns, alliances, and arms races; it also inhabits another realm, one embedded in the desire for respect, status, attention, and appreciation. An analysis of the bomb thus demands a wider focus that extends beyond conventional security studies or international relations and looks at the multiple meanings of the bomb as well as the many anxieties it seeks to quell.

I undertake this analysis through three overlapping but analytically distinct sections. I begin by outlining theoretical literatures on the social nature of things as a means to understand the global semiotic economy in which the Indian nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998 make sense. I next examine the special significance of science in a colonial context and its entailments for a postcolonial society, especially the need for spectacular state effects through science. I then turn to the distinctive characteristics of the Indian middle class and its relationship to both the political realm and the larger population that constitutes the "silent nation." I show how the push for nuclearization has a complex and disturbing relationship to electoral democracy, the changing nature of access to political power in recent decades, and middle-class attitudes toward the people and their perceived superfluity in an era of economic liberalization. Overall,

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I argue that the desire of the Indian middle class to occupy center stage in a world of nations is inseparable from its desire to be seen as developed or advanced, and to be rid of a large section of fellow citizens viewed as irrelevant and an impediment to its own enjoyment of the nation.

Objects as Incarnated Signs

The title of this essay is clearly inspired by Arjun Appadurai's work on the semiotics of commodities and consumption.[2] Following a long and distinguished tradition within cultural anthropology, Appadurai argues that in assessing the value of commodities we have been overly enamored of their use or functionality, and have ignored or underestimated the role of exchange, social interactions, fetishization, thwarted desire, and the symbolic realm in general. He reminds us that a commodity should be seen more as a social signifier whose possession or lack stratifies individuals, classes, and cultures as it circulates through a space. Indeed, any rigid separation between use- and exchange-values of commodities is difficult to sustain as they leak into one another at the very outset of their definitions. In other words, the status of things is determined as much in a social and symbolic economy of signs, signifiers, and desires as in their putative use-value defined narrowly in terms of their functions. In a significant passage, Appadurai notes,

> Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics,* construed broadly. This argument . . . justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.[3]

Besides emphasizing social exchange as critical to the determination of value, and the centrality of politics to this process, Appadurai's work also has an insightful discussion of a special section of commodities, namely, luxury goods. Goods such as these are distinguished even more by their distance from common utility, and they are freighted with an excess of social significance. I suggest that nuclear weapons might be regarded as exemplars of this special class of luxury goods in an international symbolic and security economy. Appadurai outlines a list of attributes of such luxury goods:

(1) *restriction,* either by price or by law, to elites;
(2) *complexity of acquisition,* which may or may not be a function of real "scarcity";
(3) *semiotic virtuosity,* that is, the capacity to signal fairly complex social messages (as do pepper in cuisine, silk in dress, jewels in adornment, and relics in worship);
(4) *specialized knowledge* as a prerequisite for their "appropriate" consumption, that is, regulation by fashion; and

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(5) a high degree of *linkage* of their consumption *to body, person, and personality.*[4]

These attributes of luxury goods whose purpose is primarily "rhetorical and social" is extraordinarily appropriate in a discussion of the global system of signs that has governed nuclear weapons since 1945. The nonproliferation regime that has tried to control nuclear weapons can easily be seen as an effort of a small handful of nuclear powers to deny the same to latecomers. The operative concepts here are "restriction" and "complexity of acquisition," both of which endow the Indian nuclear pursuit with a scientific and social significance it would otherwise lack. What imputes any scientific value or salience to the bomb in the postwar world is the difficulty of acquiring the fissile materials and some of the necessary technological nuts-and-bolts—an artificial scarcity engineered by the nuclear haves through the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the sanctions consequent upon its violation.

The clearly neocolonial character of an international regime obsessed with horizontal proliferation (to Third World societies) and blind to vertical proliferation (within the members of the nuclear weapons club) generates a field of value in which India's nonparticipation can be narrated as anticolonial resistance and the assertion of national sovereignty.[5] Moreover, the restrictions on the mobility of materials and technology allow Indian scientists and the political establishment to portray this reinvention of a sixty-year-old wheel as pathbreaking, an insignia of scientific originality and acumen. As the nuclear scientist and peace activist Pervez Hoodbhoy demonstrates in his careful study, while the nuclear tests in India and Pakistan reflect at most a certain degree of engineering or organizational skills on the part of certain state bureaucracies, they have "little to do with cutting-edge science, original scientific research, high technology, or the country's general scientific progress. . . . [N]uclear weapons and missile development is today a second-rate science. The undeniable fact is that the technology of nuclear bombs belongs to the 1940s, and the furious pace of science makes that ancient history."[6]

The international nonproliferation regime further creates a theater in which the outsmarting of Western intelligence agencies' surveillance and monitoring of the Indian nuclear establishment becomes an occasion of rejoicing and pride. The tests of May 1998 gained salience and value in part because, on at least one prior occasion (when Narasimha Rao was prime minister in the first half of the 1990s), everything was supposedly in place and ready to go when American detection and pressure forced the Indian regime to abort the tests. Intermixed here is a sense of achievement at having outfoxed the Americans, along with pleasure in the fact that one is considered worthy of surveillance rather than being, as it were, "off the radar."

In the short-lived euphoria following the tests of May 1998, issues of national masculinity, self-esteem, and anger over Western indifference were prominent. As Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena Party (a right-wing Hindu fundamentalist organization based largely in the western state of Maharashtra, and an ally of the Bharatiya Janata

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Party), famously declared: the bombs had proved that "we are not eunuchs anymore." There were many such statements that saw the tests as a counter to self-perceptions of Indian effeminacy, weakness, and a historical record of repeated subjugations.[7] They show the constant juxtaposition of insecurities about national masculinity—as indexed in statements such as Thackeray's above—and the hope that nuclear weapons would conclusively demonstrate their irrelevance. The bomb's literal links to the body and personality of the desired hyper-masculine Indian is palpable in such discourses.

This perceived Western indifference, if not contempt, toward India is one of the most consistent themes underlying middle-class support for the tests, and for India's nuclear program in general. The feeling was that this would awaken the West to India's development, her successes and accomplishments, and her real status as a world power—and counter a media obsession with rail accidents, natural disasters, poverty, dowry deaths, and the caste system. Achievement of "great power status," membership in the UN Security Council, recognition as a "global player"—these are repeatedly touted as the desired outcome of, and reason for, the tests of 1998.[8] The bomb has a polyvalent quality in such discourses—what Appadurai calls "semiotic virtuosity"—wherein it stands for a number of things simultaneously. It is regarded as a sign of India's advancement and equality with the Western developed countries, a negation of stereotypes about the effeminacy and historical weakness of the nation, and an argument against the mimetic and derivative nature of its science and technology.

Inescapable in these links between the bomb and a refashioned national self is the element of fetishization. Evoking the cargo cults of South Seas islanders in the aftermath of their "discovery" by the Western nations in earlier centuries, Indian supporters of the bomb seemed to believe that its mere acquisition would magically bring all the other accompaniments of "development"—affluence, status, recognition, and, most of all, respect. The sheer possession of something owned by the West is seen as synonymous with the re-creation of the structures of "advanced" production, lifestyles, histories, and societal contexts within domestic space. The talismanic appropriation of Western military uniforms, spent bullets, decrepit weapons, discarded artifacts, and their revalorization as symbols of status and substance within South Pacific societies, is not that different from the ways in which a poor and underdeveloped country such as India seeks to recalibrate its position in the global order of nations through detonating a few bombs.

The bomb continues to be seen as an instant antidote to a certain narration of history in which India was a supine and pacific victim of invaders from the outside, a long-suffering civilization that had now finally asserted its manhood. The historical veracity of this narrative of victimhood and the image of a peaceful civilization is rarely questioned within middle-class India; indeed, it is one of the enduring staples of journalistic and historical narrations of the nation.[9] Such a self-understanding is something which India's Dalits and Adivasis, for all too long the victims of development, as well as its smaller neighboring countries, would find ludicrous. That there is

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something truly pathetic in longing for Western attention, and that attention garnered under such circumstances could not possibly be authentic or real, seems not to matter in the least. In a concise summary of the bomb as fetish, Amitav Ghosh notes that "it is a great vessel filled with all the unfulfilled aspirations and thwarted dreams of the last fifty years—ambitions of a larger and grander place in the world, for a rearrangement of global power, for a rebirth of national pride."[10]

Underlying the adulation of the scientific enclave following the 1974 and 1998 tests is a theme elaborated in the rest of this essay: in the view of significant sections of the middle class, Indians excel when they are insulated from the corrosive influence of politics, and when merit is given its deserved rewards. The figure of the scientist becomes merit incarnate, and the bomb represents the achievement of a mind unburdened of political interference. The politicians standing alongside the scientists around the craters in Pokhran gain symbolic capital through a strange and ironic reversal: they are effective politicians because, under their regime, India's nuclear scientists have the necessary insulation, secrecy, and autonomy from politics itself in order to succeed. In other words, the political regime seeks legitimization for having acted in ways that are apolitical—or, more precisely, above politics. The very brevity and matter-of-factness that characterized Vajpayee's announcement of the successful May 1998 tests, the careful choice of words presenting it as a national achievement of "our scientists"—rather than a partisan one—were all calibrated to gain political capital from an event coded as simultaneously anti- and supra-political.[11]

India was the 6th nation in the world to conduct a nuclear test, and is currently the 127th nation (out of 177) in the latest World Bank's Human Development Index, flanked by countries like Botswana and Namibia, and behind Gabon and Mongolia. The symbolic field of value created by the nonproliferation regime allows Indian elites to offer the "achievement" of nuclear power status as a response to the abysmal state of development indicated by such rankings. Some of the questions that are inadequately entertained within Indian media coverage and debates on the bomb are these: If so many other countries have the technical and scientific capacity to test and acquire weapons (as noted by Hoodbhoy above), why have they chosen not to do so? Why do so many ex-colonial countries, as sensitive as India to the issues of neocolonialism, not find it problematic to sign the nonproliferation treaty? If this truly is a sign of a country's scientific acumen and talent, what does Pakistan's emulation of India's tests a few weeks later in 1998 tell us, especially given the extremely poor state of scientific institutions in that country? Could the obsession of some in India to acquire nuclear weapons not be read as a sign of continued colonization rather than as the means to escape that status? Why must we seek to be equal to the best in the art of killing large numbers of people—and not similarly prioritize feeding, clothing, housing, and educating them? The vehement anger and sexist disparaging that the author Arundhati Roy faced for posing a version of such questions in her widely publicized essay are indicative of a postcolonial insecurity that deserves more inquiry.[12]

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Science and Postcolonial Space: The Politics of the Spectacular

In his first book, Ashis Nandy examined the lives and careers of the Bengali scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937) and the Tamil mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887–1920).[13] In an insightful analysis of the extent to which familiarity with Western education, culture, and civilization simultaneously enabled and enfeebled the creativity of the two men, Nandy argues that Ramanujan's self-confidence, in contrast to Bose's insecurities, arose precisely from the fact that the former was less versed in discourses of colonialism and nationalism, less familiar with Western traditions of inquiry and scientific legitimating processes, and, to put it differently, less obsessed about decolonization and his own originality. Ramanujan's virtually autodidactic learning, his very Hindu religiosity, and his immersion in a highly orthodox Tamil Brahmin household left him relatively less concerned about his place in a "universal" (read: Western) hall of scientific fame. He was not as concerned as Bose about nationalism or disproving notions of Western superiority and the inferiority of "Indian" science. Ramanujan's un-self-reflective location of his own genius in visions and mystic relations with God made his introspections orthogonal to a colonial intelligentsia's usual preoccupations about mimesis and originality that could and did paralyze someone such as Bose. Nandy outlined the contrast between the two men:

> Bose's science, on the other hand, was coloured by the psychology of subjecthood and feelings of personal inadequacy. It allowed him neither enough autonomy nor flexibility. Unlike the European scientists of the age of faith and other Indian scientists more immersed in traditions, Bose in his science could not take advantage of the integrative strengths and range of his personality. . . . This was unavoidable. For the very sensitivities that made Bose creative also made him sensitive to his colonial status. If his nationalism was a straitjacket, it was one that he could not help wearing. *One could even speculate that it was this sensitivity to issues of dominance and submission, and not any actual interference in the processes of research, which was often the main contribution of colonialism to intellectual decay.* . . . Bose's modern nationalism bound him too closely to the West, both in admiration and in hatred.[14]

Characteristically, Nandy privileges the psychological over the material in assessing the impact of Western colonialism on Indian science. The combination of admiration of the West and hatred, which he discerns in Bose and rightly regards as a straitjacket, would have a profound impact on the evolution of both science and the middle class in the post-independent period.

During the colonial period modern science served as a critical differentiating principle between rulers and ruled.[15] Western mastery over space and time—revealed by the railway, the telegraph, the bridges that spanned raging rivers and the dams that controlled them, trigonometric land surveys, archaeological excavations, epidemiology, immunization, and multiple other scientific achievements—stood in contrast to native awe and surrender to the forces of nature.[16] The "civilizing project" that

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redeemed colonialism was predicated on the assumption that science (emergent from Western rationality) and education would eventually awaken the native from his sloth and slumber.

As Gyan Prakash notes, however, colonial science was always underlain by an important contradiction.[17] On the one hand, the rationality and grandeur of colonial science presumed an intelligent and discerning native capable of comprehending the magnitude of what was being achieved. On the other, colonial rule, based as it was on a notion of irreversible civilizational superiority over the native, also had to believe that he was irremediably unscientific and irrational, and hence incapable of serving as the discerning audience that could offer any admiration that was genuine. It was the native's inherent inferiority that necessitated colonial rule in the first place and justified its continuance in the second. Among other things, this contradiction or paradox resulted in a translation of colonial science into the realm of the spectacular, critical to efforts at legitimating alien rule in a largely illiterate society. Further, it resulted in science becoming a definitive icon of power, wealth, intelligence, success, and rank. Science was not only statist from its very inception—in the sense that science in the colonies was primarily conducted under state auspices—but it was statist in that it was always also about legitimating (alien) political rule. Finally, the dissemination of science through society aimed not so much at the molecular transformation of ways of thinking among the "population" (itself a novel category at this time, as Foucault reminds us), the inculcation of scientific rationality or scientific temper, but focused on spectacular demonstrations of what one might term "state effects," that is, the legitimation of the state through the staging of scientific spectacles or events under its auspices. This cluster of attributes that characterized Indian science during the colonial period—its spectacular quality, its iconic status, its statism, and its intimate relationship to the production of state effects—would remain intact to a substantial degree after independence.

The democratization of science that had occurred in the West—with mass literacy, free public education, rising standards of living across all classes—bypassed colonial and independent India. In the well-worn cliché of science studies, science in the West owed more to the steam engine than the steam engine owed to science. What is conveyed by this cliché (alongside the old saw about necessity being the mother of invention) is that many an early inventor was not a scientist but rather a craftsman, an artisan, an improviser or innovator trying to find a way around a practical problem in production in an industrializing society. The contrast with the emergence of science in a place like colonial India could not be more profound. The social base of the scientist here was overwhelmingly the literati, a group quite unaccustomed to working with their hands. Science emerged in a colonial political-economy trapped in technological stagnation, deindustrialization, and the freezing of social relations in the agricultural sector that produced and further aggravated the idea of a "surplus" population. The state was focused on extraction of land revenue, maintenance of a captive market for

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British manufactured goods and raw material sources, and maintenance of law and order (defined minimally as the protection of settler property and lives). The linkages between science, society, and economy that characterized the early industrializers were not merely absent in India but were systematically distorted and extraverted into a classically colonial pattern, to use terms from a now unfashionable political economy literature.

Just as Hamza Alavi spoke of the overdeveloped state as a postcolonial legacy in South Asia,[18] one can similarly talk of a distorted and "overdeveloped" science there. The problems that Indian science set for itself reflected metropolitan necessities rather than homegrown ones. It is not that there was no awareness or resistance to such a form of intellectual colonization; rather, as in other realms, it was colonialism's ability to present a certain understanding of the present and a certain desired vision of the future as a *universal common sense* (despite its provincially Western provenance) that has proved to be so enduring and difficult to overturn. To use Partha Chatterjee's framework, Indian science often constituted a form of resistance at the level of the problematic ("we, too, can do what you have done") but seemed incapable of conceptualizing an alternative at the level of the thematic of a discourse of nationalism ("we can do what we need to do for ourselves").[19] The forgotten Luddites of alternative sciences in India—the Kumarappas, Gandhis, and others who argued for technologies appropriate to one of the most labor-abundant economies in the world—testify to the degree to which Indian science responded to alien puzzles and extraneous material requirements.

Given the very limited ambit of formal education (at independence about 15% of the population was literate), proficiency in science, and fluency in the English language more generally, served as the marker separating the native middle classes from the people. Sections of the native middle classes took to science in the late nineteenth century, and their enthusiasm for the scientific method, deductive logic, positivism, and other accompaniments of the modern temper are indexed in journals, literature, scientific societies, social movements, religious reformations, and, increasingly, in domestically owned and operated textile mills, chemical plants, research laboratories, locomotive factories, steel mills, and the like. Science and nationalist politics came to be intertwined from the outset, as scientific acumen was one of the prominent signifiers of readiness for self-government and independence. As I have argued elsewhere, for Indian nationalists, science was the definitive marker separating the colonizer from the colonized, and also the source of redemption for the colony once independence had been achieved. Nehru, for example, systematically sets aside one reason after another for the conquest of India by the West and ultimately settles on two: first, India's political disunity and disintegration following the last of the great Mughal emperors; and, second, the fact that modern science and reason emerged initially in the West, allowing it to qualitatively distance itself from the rest of the world, and indeed colonize

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it. It was the twinning of these two historical events that explained the meteoric rise of England in the centuries after the Industrial Revolution, and the concomitant fall of a once-rich culture and civilization such as India.[20]

Science by the late colonial period was therefore burdened with an unrealistic set of expectations. It came to be regarded as the means by which India would reverse centuries of underdevelopment and speedily gain its rightful place in the comity of nations. As Prakash notes, "Introduced as a code of alien power and domesticated as an element of elite nationalism, science has always been asked to accomplish a great deal—to authorize an enormous leap into modernity, and anchor the entire edifice of modern culture, identity, politics, and economy."[21] In some senses, this was the temper and spirit of the early decades after independence—the Nehru years—as India sought to transform itself into a modern society through science, planning, and a state-led public sector. Yet, given the sharp disjunction between the material culture of an "overpopulated" and largely poor society, and a scientific culture that had emerged in the shadow of a Western, colonial form of education confined to the literati, this transformation was always going to be very difficult.

What emerged was one of the most dedicated and ascetic attempts by an upper-caste elite to develop an entire country while bypassing the social. The focus on science, planning, a controlled industrial state-sector (financed largely through external aid), and the relative neglect of the agrarian sector (in terms both of state investment and effective land reforms) obviated the need to encounter the domestic social too closely. The Nehruvian state was a quintessentially pedagogical state that spoke at and for the nation—it rarely ever spoke to it or with it.[22] This was a form of development that abhorred contact with the masses, the soil, and the tools and machinery necessary for development, while emphasizing rhetorical exhortations, elegant planning models, and nuanced argumentation. India remains one of the most assiduous efforts to theorize one's way to development.

The specific characteristics of Indian science—its limited ambit within society, its often derivative and extraverted character, its emphasis on spectacular effects—were fundamentally at odds with expectations that it would be the redemptive source of widespread development. The failure of the postcolonial nation to come into its own—in the sense of sufficient numbers of peoples seeing a tangible improvement in their lives as a consequence of independence—has meant that science remains an academic practice divorced of any organic linkage with the material requirements of the nation at large. It is an arcane practice of urban, educated, upper-caste middle classes locked in a competition for recognition and rewards by an ostensibly international but overwhelmingly Western jury. The tendency to confuse such recognitions and prizes with the real thing—meaningful change in the lives of a significant number of Indians—occasions one of the epigraphs at the head of this essay. Shiv Visvanathan notes the alienation of Indian science from a context-bound, socially relevant,

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problem-solving enterprise to an obsession with recognition from Western scientific forums when he recounts how Atma Ram, a rarity among Indian scientists given his early work experience on the shop floor of a sugar factory,

> . . . asked again and again, "Why is it that science in independent India, despite all the investments in it, is not the potentially creative force it threatened to be during the nationalist period?" He then provided part of the answer. He confessed that the Nehruvian dream was to make India win Olympic medals in science: "we really believed that Nobels in science went hand in glove with rise in GNP." He then added that it was a race in which we will always be poor thirds, or at best glorified seconds.[23] Atma Ram's critique of Indian science encapsulates the limitations of a prize-wanting science as distinct from a problem-solving science.[24]

To understand the 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests, and the inevitable slide into weaponization and more tests in the future, we have to place it in the context of the failure of the postcolonial middle class to deliver on its promise of general social development and rising standards of living for the people at large. For close to four decades after independence, economic growth rates averaged just over 3 percent per annum, which, once deflated by population growth rates of over 2 percent per annum over this same period, brought per capita annual growth rates to a glacial 1.4 percent or so. Given the abysmally low starting points and widespread poverty in 1947, this meant entire generations have lived and died without reaching the Promised Land. Although many narratives seek to explain this failure—export pessimism, a rent-seeking over-regulatory state, failure of land reform, urban bias, a monopolistic private sector, Hindu or Indian fatalism, flawed developmental models, overpopulation, wrong priorities—they all agree that postcolonial India missed the development bus. The masses—and their imminent development—had always constituted both the silent referent and the alibi of the postcolonial middle class. As country after country sped by India in the 1970s and 1980s, there seemed nowhere to hide. This failure of the Indian middle class to deliver on development is an important constitutive element of its identity in the last quarter of the twentieth century—and is crucial to understand its nuclear politics.

The 1974 and 1998 tests were perverse insignia of the failure of the middle class's self-defined historical mission. As Abraham's landmark work shows with careful attention to detail, the impetus to produce the bomb occurred in a context where the privileged enclave of scientists within the country's Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) realized they were not going to be able to deliver on the promise of cheap and efficient nuclear energy to the nation. The switch to the bomb within the AEC was a way to ensure the continued legitimacy and stature of a strategic enclave that could not have withstood a social and political audit within a democratic society. This shift on the part of the scientific elite dovetailed with the conjunctural needs of state elites faced with problems regarding their own political and electoral legitimacy.[25] While the connections between developmental failures, the burden of over-expectation, and

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the decision to test the bomb were by no means direct and unmediated, the former constituted the historical context within which the latter gained a semblance of rationality. Not for the first time in a postcolonial context, the response to a failure on the part of elites to deliver on the material front came through the staging of a symbolic and spectacular state effect, namely, the testing of nuclear bombs.

The Indian Middle Class, Population, and Politics

In his now classic formulation on state power and social classes in India, Pranab Bardhan outlined a thesis that has found many takers and few dissenters.[26] He argued that by virtue of its education, and by its disproportionate presence in the state bureaucracy, the public sector, and the professions more generally, the Indian middle class was one of three "dominant proprietary classes" that constituted the ruling elite. That neither of the other two dominant classes—the industrial bourgeoisie or the rich farmer class—was able to decisively establish its hegemony over the nation augmented the power of this middle class, and was the chief source of the relative autonomy of the Indian state which "formulated goals and pointed policy directions, neither at the behest of nor on behalf of the proprietary classes"[27]

Bardhan's formulation (which owes much to Alavi's piece cited above on the overdeveloped state in postcolonial South Asia as well as to an earlier literature on "intermediate regimes") merits reproduction:

> It is not customary to include them [professionals and state bureaucrats—S.K.] among proprietary classes, but if physical capital can be the basis of class stratification, so can be human capital in the form of education, skills and technical expertise. . . . In a country where the overwhelming majority are illiterates or drop-outs at the primary education level, the educated elite enjoy a high scarcity value for their education and profession. By managing to direct educational investment away from the masses, they have been able to protect their scarcity rent. . . . Brahmins and other upper castes are disproportionately represented.

The prominence Bardhan accords to the middle class in the governing of India has historical antecedents. In an insightful work on the colonial origins of this middle class in northern India, Sanjay Joshi observes a number of factors crucial to its formation. The colonial middle classes fashioned themselves as cultural entrepreneurs who were the native interlocutors to a desired and superior modernity. They emphasized proficiency in education, especially Western education, and attributes such as personal discipline, effective time management, ambition, deferred consumption, and diligence. The emergence of new public spheres (in part by their own activities) created a stage on which this middle class stood as the "new arbiters of appropriate social conduct and establish(ed) new modes of political activity that empowered them at the expense of the traditional elites of the city, less powerful social groups, and ultimately also the

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British rulers. Much of the power of this group of men, and later women . . . came from their claim to emulate an ideal-typical modernity first appropriated to similar projects by their counterparts in the West."[28]

These new cultural entrepreneurs were by no means rich (they had neither inherited wealth nor could they afford not to work for a living) and were not at the apex of society. They were overwhelmingly upper caste, and in the case of Muslims were Ashrafs. In the rapidly changing circumstances of the late nineteenth century, and the enlarging public political sphere of the early twentieth century, they increasingly emerged as representatives of a desired future, as arbiters to a rational and scientific modern, and, increasingly, as legitimate spokesmen for the nation.[29] Extending Joshi's analysis, the self-fashioning of this middle class emphasized its merit within modernist discourses of achievement and rationality, and implicitly contrasted these with inheritance and 'traditional' ascription. That this emphasis on "merit" was itself premised, especially in a largely poor, illiterate, and deeply hierarchical society, on a favorable set of circumstances within a colonial sociopolitical economy was not often realized. Obviously a key historical reason for the prominence of the middle class in postcolonial India was its very centrality during the nationalist movement for independence, wherein it constituted the social base both of the leadership of the anticolonial movement and the colonial administrative apparatus that ran the country. The highly protracted and legalistic nature of the nationalist struggle, the slow devolution of power into Indian hands, the careful shepherding of the anticolonial movement away from "divisive" social and class-based antagonisms, and the unbroken continuity in the Indian Civil Service after independence essentially meant that middle classes were disproportionately represented among the political elite that ran the country in the early years of independence.

In India, for all these reasons, it is logical to conflate the ruling class and middle class and speak interchangeably of the two, especially in the decades immediately after independence. It was for all practical purposes the attendant public of the Indian political sphere, and had an inordinate degree of influence in what happened therein. The self-construction of this middle class, its changing attitude toward "politics" and the "masses" in the postcolonial period, the impact of economic liberalization, and the links of these processes to nuclear politics are critical to the rest of this essay. To anticipate (and greatly adumbrate) the argument, I suggest that in the era of mass democratic politics and economic liberalization, the Indian middle class has grown increasingly alienated from the larger population that constitutes the rest of the country, and that this alienation manifests itself, among other arenas, most significantly in its nuclear politics.

First, *pace* Joshi, this middle class sees its rise to prominence during the late colonial period and in the postcolonial era as essentially meritocratic. It was the ability of this class to master the new language of administration (English), its capacity for hard mental work, and its felicity with the emerging modern disciplines—law,

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science, engineering, accountancy, economics, medicine, literature, history, and so on—that accounted for its rise. Its success was based neither on the accident of inherited wealth as landed property nor through practices traditionally regarded as suspect (for example, mercantile trade, investment and speculation, profiteering, and moneylending). The Indian middle class would like to be evaluated as a successful instance of a modernized and developed segment of the world, one that has played the game of Western modernity—with its emphasis on achievement rather than ascription—dexterously and with poise. A large portion of its sense of ressentiment vis-à-vis the Western world comes from its perception that it is not given its due, that it is literally invisible because the focus is trained exclusively on the poverty-stricken masses and on natural disasters.

Second, to this ruling/middle class, "politics" is increasingly regarded as the domain of the profane and the dirty: politics is that which intervenes to prevent a meritorious person from earning what is rightfully his. The middle class today defines politics as uneducated legislators and ministers, criminals in legislatures, statist inefficiency and corruption, reservation programs for underprivileged groups, and criminalization of public life. Mass politics emerged in the post-independence period when India went in for universal adult franchise, and the world's largest electoral democracy has steadily eroded the unwritten privilege of the middle class. As previously excluded sections have translated their larger numbers at the polls into demands for greater access to opportunities in education, employment, state subsidies, and other entitlements that were hitherto the exclusive privy of the middle classes, "politics" has become the name for the process by which this middle class feels marginalized. As Kaviraj, among others, has noted, in India the liberal democratic ethos of this middle class (which was quite shallow to begin with) has shrunk even further as mass politics and elections have steadily broadened—and coarsened—political participation.[30] In an unusual reversal, democracy means far more to the rural and urban poor than it does to the educated middle classes today, as was witnessed during the Emergency and in the elections that followed its lifting in 1977. One might say that, for many in India's middle class, democracy is to be valued only because it gives the country an exalted status compared to the rest of the Third World (and especially neighboring Pakistan). This limpid commitment is also revealed in the consistently higher turnouts for elections among the poor and the rural, in contrast to the urban middle classes.

Third, and closely related to the above point, is the notion dear to the middle class that there exists an extra- or supra-political sphere from where ethical interventions to cleanse public life of corruption and graft might emerge.[31] This transcendent, moral, antipolitical space has a long tradition in Indian thought, and has been occupied for varying lengths of time in the last century by figures as diverse as Mohandas Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan, Vinobha Bhave, Arun Shourie, T. N. Seshan, Rajiv Gandhi, B. G. Khairnar, V. P. Singh, Medha Patkar, Kiran Bedi, Abdul Kalam, and Harsh Mander. It reflects the desire of the Indian middle class for a knight in shining armor

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who will restore merit to its righteous place in the distribution of rewards—and put politics in its proper place. Crucially, it allows for the possibility that bypassing the political can itself be an ethical act. An individual sees his actions as ethical precisely because they refuse to be bound by the injunctions of a state that is no longer committed to meritocracy and captured by those who can commandeer large numbers of people to the hustings. Bypassing the state can also be seen as a form of resistance to its excessive bureaucratization, and a means to escape the effects of dirty politics on actions taken in the "national" interest.

Such an understanding of ethical politics as antipolitics can, among other things, justify a strategic enclave's secrecy and its desired insulation from politics and social audits. This idea of governance by a supra-political scientific and technocratic elite is greatly appealing, as it stands as proof of what "ordinary" middle class Indians can achieve if only they were unimpeded by the messy politics of Indian democracy and an inefficient state. Inter alia, it can also justify this same enclave's cavalier dismissal of a citizen group's demands for environmental impact assessments of a nuclear plant, or an intrepid journalist's request for information regarding safety records and radiation levels around a reactor, or mobilization by Dalits or tribals against the latest developmental project that threatens their homelands and livelihood.

And, finally, the Indian middle class's distaste for mass politics is accompanied by an ardent desire for technological solutions to socioeconomic and political problems. In an insightful passage, Suhas Palshikar outlines this antipolitical common sense:

> At the basis of these sentiments there lies a firm belief (in middle-class minds) that social issues can have a technocratic solution. . . . The middle classes believe that politics is irrelevant; solutions to various issues are either "economic" or technology based . . . Issues concerning public policy are not seen as contestations of competing interests because the middle classes do not recognize contestability of policies. Policies are understood as universalized wisdom based on "knowledge" and "expertise." The distrust of politicians and the notion of policy as the business of objective experts push the middle classes into the direction of bureaucracy and judiciary. The former is seen as the non-partisan and legitimate centre of decision making and the latter as neutral arbiter. Politics and politicians do not have a respectable place in the world view of the middle classes.[32]

The historical alienation of this middle class from the rest of the nation has sharply intensified in recent decades with economic liberalization, as well as the increased movement of Indians to the West and elsewhere. Under presently hegemonic neoliberal developmental models, the responsibility that the state and middle class feel for the rest of society is palpably diminishing. The benchmarks for consumption and desired lifestyles are set from outside India. The guilt associated with anything bordering conspicuous consumption—a guilt that was almost the habitus of being middle class and Indian in the 1950s and 1960s—has been replaced by an emphasis on enjoying the present. Although it is true that Nehruvian rhetoric regarding socialism

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and responsibility of elites for poorer sections of the country was overblown, at least it indexed a guilty conscience. In its hypocrisy lay a tacit acknowledgment that the poorer country cousins were nevertheless a part of the national family.[33] Today, it is as if many in the middle class wish that the poor would simply go away or disappear (but only after making the morning cup of tea and taking the kids to school), for they impede the enjoyment of the nation so desperately desired by the middle class.[34]

As always, Nandy's triangulation of the modern ideology of development, science, and security allows him to put his finger on what one has to describe as the genocidal impulse that has come to characterize many in India's middle class:

> There are a lot of Indians now who are willing to sacrifice the unmanageable, chaotic, real-life Indians for the sake of the idea of India. They are miserable that while the Indian democracy allows them to choose a new set of political leaders every five years, it does not allow them to choose once in a while the right kind of people to populate the country. Instead, they have to do with the same impossible mass of 950 million Indians—uneducable, disorganized, squabbling, and, above all, multiplying like bed bugs. For in the Indianness of Indians who are getting empowered lies, according to many learned scholars, the root cause of all the major problems of the country.[35]

Many have remarked on the lack of concern in the Indian press, and in the South Asian nuclear debate in general, with issues like mass casualties, breakdown of services, lack of hospitals with burn treatment centers, and the impossibility of even basic forms of civil defense (gas masks, stored potable water, bomb shelters, evacuation plans) in the event of a nuclear exchange. This is part of a larger story of wanton or deliberate neglect that has characterized India's nuclear establishment: the overwhelming negative fallouts—radiation; poisoning of land, water, and the atmosphere; birth defects; and cancers and other illnesses—have been preponderantly visited upon Adivasis, Dalits, and the poorest sections of people.

Such lack of concern for those least able to protect themselves is by no means new. It stems from a widely accepted "reality" within India's middle class that we as a society are overpopulated. As far back as 1959, in a speech to a conference on population and family planning, the father of India's atomic program, Homi Bhabha (himself a bachelor with no issue, as we say in India) suggested funding for research into a substance that would reduce the fertility of people by 30 percent when mixed with rice.[36] Such statements often disguised as jokes, accompanied by a rueful laugh to indicate that one is not fully serious, are a commonplace of Indian middle-class life. Yet one cannot help but feel that they also articulate a barely repressed desire to be rid of a substantial number of one's countrymen in order to better enjoy the nation. Quite often, the one issue that is seen as separating the Indian middle class from joining the ranks of the advanced, developed nations of this world is India's "surplus" population.

Amitav Ghosh recounts an Indian army officer telling him of a secret plan to win the war against Pakistan which he wished to communicate to the (then) Defense

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Minister George Fernandes. Essentially it involved detonating a nuclear bomb a mile-deep within the Siachin glacier causing it to melt and simply drown Pakistan.[37] I was recently conversing with a fellow Indian and well-published security studies specialist employed in a defense think tank. As we talked about a recent earthquake in Kashmir, he wished a quake of over 9.0 on the Richter scale would hit Pakistan and "solve that problem for us permanently."

Some may point out that such comments are made about a neighboring country and not indicative of a genocidal impulse toward one's own citizens. Setting aside the problematic ethic which excuses contemplating genocide simply because it is across a recently drawn line on a map, what such arguments fail to notice is one is often talking about oneself when ostensibly talking about the "enemy." There is a displacement of attributed traits about the poor, the Muslim, and, by extension, the Pakistani in Indian discourses: they are all seen as hyper-fertile, unconcerned about family size, incapable of deferring present enjoyment in the interests of the future, and the main impediment to national enjoyment. Their presence both produces Indian-ness and ensures its incompleteness. The genocidal impulse voiced in the context of nuclear war with Pakistan, from this angle, is part of an impulse directed at one's own countrymen. Or, as the final sentence of Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* would have it: "The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind for these weapons are, in the end, none other than their own people."[38]

Conclusion

This essay has tried to connect the evolution of a postcolonial middle class in India and the decision to take up nuclearization in recent decades. Put most bluntly, it has argued that the historical alienation of this middle class from the vast majority of Indians has now manifested itself in a desire to be rid of them altogether. While the bomb is an important manifestation of this desire, it also congeals within itself the complex history of derivative science in a colonial society, the role that spectacular science has played in legitimizing the state and elites of a postcolonial society, and its salience as a resistant symbol against Western neocolonialism and indifference to Indian aspirations. In some way, this essay also represents an effort to answer a simple question: Why does one of the poorest and most populous nations in the world wish to join a small handful of nations that have the capability of annihilating this planet?

About twenty-five years ago, at the onset of the European movement for nuclear disarmament, Edward Thompson suggested (following Marx) that if the hand-mill epitomized feudal society and the saw-mill that of industrial capitalism, then perhaps the nuclear bomb—and the attendant category of exterminism—best represented our own times.[39] In a highly significant passage, Thompson elaborates:

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> By "exterminism" I do not indicate an intention or criminal foresight in the prime actors. And I certainly do not claim to have discovered a new "exterminist" mode of production. *Exterminism designates those characteristics of a society—expressed, in differing degrees, within its economy, its polity and its ideology—which thrust it in a direction whose outcome must be the extermination of multitudes.* The outcome will be extermination, but this will not happen accidentally (even if the final trigger is "accidental") but as the direct consequence of prior acts of policy, of the accumulation and perfection of the means of extermination, and of the structuring of whole societies so that these are directed towards that end.[40]

In the last few decades India has embarked on a set of policies in the nuclear realm that decisively move us forward on an exterminist path. When the annihilation of large numbers of people as a result of a nuclear exchange in South Asia occurs, it will have been a result of our present actions, of policies being shaped as we speak. Their foretold deaths cannot be expiated at the altar of the "accident." Some accidents, perhaps, better reveal our innermost desires than do our plans for our country.

Notes

Epigraphs from, respectively, Sanjay Dhande addressing U.S. alumni during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Institutes and quoted in Rohit Chopra, "Neoliberalism as Doxa: Bourdieu's Theory of the State and the Contemporary Indian Discourse on Globalization and Liberalization," *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3/4 (2003): 443; Arundhati Roy, "The End of Imagination," *Frontline* 15, no. 16 (August 1–14, 1998).

1. A useful collection of recent essays that reflects the range of opinion within this Indian debate can be found in D. R. Sardesai and Raju G. C. Thomas, eds., *Nuclear India in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
2. See Arjun Appadurai's introduction, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in his edited volume, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1–48.
3. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things,* 3 (emphasis in original).
4. Ibid., 38 (emphases mine).
5. For the importance of the neocolonial character of the global proliferation regime in impelling India's nuclearization, see George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
6. Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Bombs, Missiles, and Pakistani Science," in Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian, eds., *Out of the Nuclear Shadow* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 153, 156–157. Hoodbhoy goes on to note that at the present time at least sixty countries that currently do not have nuclear weapons have the necessary scientific and engineering skills to easily assemble one if they wanted to. Another recent work that demystifies the scientific aura attached to India's accomplishments in the nuclear arena is M. V. Ramana, "La Trahison Des Clercs: Scientists and India's Nuclear Bombs," in M. V. Ramana and C. Rammanohar Reddy, eds., *Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), 206–244.
7. One of the more interesting collections of such material can be found in Anand Patwardhan's documentaries, especially his *Father, Son, and Holy Bomb* and *Jang Aur Aman* (*War and Peace*).

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8. George Perkovich argues that such status-related considerations were of paramount importance in India's decision to go nuclear. See idem, *India's Nuclear Bomb.* A clear delineation of the importance of such factors, converging with strategic considerations and nuclear apartheid, written soon after the tests, can be found in Pratap Bhanu Mehta's "India: The Nuclear Politics of Self-Esteem," *Current History* 97:623 (December 1998): 403–406.

9. For a clear description of this argument in the context of nuclear politics, see Achin Vanaik, "Unravelling the Self-Image of the Indian Bomb Lobby," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), November 20–27, 2004. Available at http://www.epw.org.in/epw/uploads/articles/1399.pdf (accessed April 14, 2008). In the more general Indian context, see my essay, "Boundaries and Violence: Postcolonial Ruminations on Space," in John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal, eds., *A Companion to Political Geography* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 302–314.

10. Amitav Ghosh, *Countdown* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1999), 18.

11. The brief footage in Patwardhan's *Jang Aur Aman* showing the cluster of scientists and politicians around the bomb site in Pokhran a few days after the May 1998 tests, along with the segment of Vajpayee's speech, bears out the analysis I offer here. The career of someone such as Raja Ramanna, who at various points in his life was close to Mrs. Gandhi and to the Janata regime that appointed him scientific adviser to the cabinet of Prime Minister Morarji Desai, and who ultimately became a minister of state for scientific affairs under the Prime Ministership of V. P. Singh in the late 1980s, indicates the nonpartisan and supra-political value attached to the person of the scientist in postcolonial India. For an analysis of Ramanna's autobiography as an exemplary text revealing the zeitgeist of the Indian middle class and nuclearism, see my essay, "The Bomb, Biography and the Indian Middle Class," in *Economic and Political Weekly,* (Bombay): June 10–16, 2006. Available at http://epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2006&leaf=06&filename=10191&filetype=pdf (accessed August 4, 2006).

12. See Roy, "The End of Imagination." Much of the criticism of Roy's essay within India questioned the right of a female author of a fiction novel to hold forth on matters of national security, international affairs, and nuclear weapons. For two fairly typical examples of this reaction, which often borders on misogyny, see Anil Nair, "The Idea of Apocalypse," http://www.rediff.com/news/1999/aug/19anil.htm; and Sadanand Dhume, "Rekindling the Imagination," http://www.littleindia.com/archive/Nov98/Imagin.htm (both accessed November 7, 2005).

13. Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists,* 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). Original: Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1980.

14. Ibid., pp. 141–143 (emphasis mine).

15. One of the best general introductions to the ways in which machines and technology served as icons of colonial superiority remains Michael Adas's *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

16. See Rudyard Kipling's "The Bridge Builders" for a stunning evocation of the contrast between colonial scientific rationality and native superstition. As often with Kipling, the neat dichotomies are considerably muddier by the end of the story and intimations of hubris haunt the margins (in idem, *The Day's Work* [London: Macmillan, 1945], 1–47).

17. Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India,* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

18. Hamza Alavi, "State and Class under Peripheral Capitalism," in Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin, eds., *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing" Societies* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 289–307.

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19. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).

20. See my *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

21. Prakash, *Another Reason*, p. 12.

22. While many have previously noted Nehru's forms of address to the Indian peasantry—and the ways in which it positioned them as helpless recipients of his, and his government's, noblesse oblige—a recent work emphasizing this is Benjamin Zachariah's *Nehru: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 2004).

23. Shiv Visvanathan, *A Carnival for Science: Essays on Science, Technology, and Development* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

24. Many works have recently explored the impact of colonial rule and political economy on the emergence and character of "Indian" science. I have learned much from Deepak Kumar's excellent *Science and the Raj, 1857–1905* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), besides the works of Nandy, Visvanathan, Prakash, and Abraham cited elsewhere in this chapter.

25. Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy, and the Postcolonial State* (London: Zed, 1998).

26. See Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India,* rev. ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); original, 1984. A recent work describes Bardhan's thesis on the Indian state as the "prevailing consensus." See C. J. Fuller and John Harriss's introduction to *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India,* ed. C. J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (London: Hurst, 2001), p. 7. Another significant work that echoes Bardhan's thesis regarding the class character of the state in India is Achin Vanaik's *The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India* (London: Verso, 1990).

27. Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development,* p. 38.

28. Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2–3. For a similar, but less thoroughly worked out understanding of the emergence of a fractured modern within Bengal, see Sumit Sarkar's essays "Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth, and History in Colonial Bengal" and "Kaliyuga, Chakri, and Bhakti," in idem, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997).

29. For a parallel, and in important ways distinctive, set of issues in the emergence of a public sphere and a high-caste Brahmanic middle class in southern India, in contrast to Joshi's context of Lucknow, see M. S. S. Pandian's "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics, and the Public Sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), May 4, 2002. Available at http://epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2002&leaf=05&filename=4425&filetype=html (accessed August 4, 2006).

30. Sudipto Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1–39).

31. See Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), for a fascinating discussion of this antipolitical space as the ground for varied kinds of interventions in Indian politics, most notably in his analysis of the rise of the Shiv Sena in Bombay and Maharashtra in recent decades.

32. Suhas Palshikar, "Politics of India's Middle Classes," in Imitaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, eds., *Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2002), 178.

33. As late as 1971 Mrs. Gandhi built her electoral platform on the slogan "Garibi Hatao" ("Abolish Poverty"), indexing this rhetorical commitment. Yet, by 1975, under the cloak of the Emergency, her son Sanjay Gandhi was already implementing what we know to be the

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secret dream of many a middle-class Indian: mass sterilization of the poor, along with their physical relocation out of sight. See Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narrative of the Emergency in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), for a substantiation of the points I make here about the Emergency, the complicity of the middle class in its excesses, and the worldview it entails.

34. Thomas Hansen captures the dispensability of the masses in the eyes of middle-class India when he notes in the context of urban planning in Mumbai that "the most striking feature of these plans, however, was the extent to which they were marked by a distinct upper middle class view of the overwhelming part of the city, namely, vast expanses of slum or ordinary neighborhoods that one must drive through on new expressways, drive under on a new metro, fly over in helicopters, or avoid altogether in hovercraft services that would take the upper middle class from their homes in the western suburbs to the city center without ever having to pass through the congested city" (*Wages of Violence,* pp. 207–208). A whole story can be told about the links between economic liberalization, the media revolution, changes in consumption, and the recent resurgence of Hindutva and majoritarianism. I can do no more than point to recent works such as Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1996); and Achin Vanaik, *The Bourgeois Transformation.*

35. Ashis Nandy, "The Twilight of Certitudes," *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 3 (1998): 293.

36. See Zia Mian, "Homi Bhabha Killed a Crow," in idem and Ashis Nandy, eds., *The Nuclear Debate: Ironies and Immoralities* (Colombo: Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 1998), p. 17.

37. Ghosh, *Countdown,* p. 43.

38. Ibid., p. 106.

39. Edward Thompson, "Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization," in Edward Thompson et al., *Exterminism and Cold War* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 4–5.

40. Ibid., p. 20 (emphasis mine).

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5

PRIDE AND PROLIFERATION: PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR PSYCHE AFTER A. Q. KHAN

Ammara Durrani

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If nuclear weapons can come to acquire the same "profound value" as the sacred symbols that supposedly condense the meaning and purpose of a religion, and if the discourse surrounding them can seem as arcane and complex as the higher reaches of religious philosophizing can be for the ordinary believer or the uninitiated, then we have surely succeeded making the politics and ideology of the possession of nuclear weapons virtually incontestable. After all, to sacralize something is precisely to remove it from the domain of normal contestation except for the "qualified" few!

Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik

In February 2005 Pakistan's former president Pervez Musharraf became accessible to the Pakistani people and the world at large on his very own personalized Web site, launched (and now managed) with much fanfare by the country's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Department of the Pakistan Army.[1] The "Personal Life" page of this Web site features a list of questions and answers pertaining to the president's life and

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person. In answer to a question as to what was "the most embarrassing moment" of his life, General Musharraf answered: "Discovering the involvement of Dr A.Q. Khan in the nuclear proliferation scandal."[2]

Musharraf's remark may be taken as reflective of the shock and humiliation experienced by the Pakistani government, media, intelligentsia, and the general public at the exposé of the A. Q. Khan nuclear proliferation affair hitting international news headlines. In February 2004 Pakistanis began tuning into sensational news reports on the country's pioneering nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan. The "father" of the nation's highly revered and much touted nuclear program came under government investigation; he was subsequently arrested for allegedly running an international nuclear proliferation network, selling sensitive information and knowledge to "rogue" states—North Korea, Iran, and Libya—for personal profit. A year down the line, the issue remains a top story both at home and abroad. Given ongoing national and international political developments, the issue carried grave implications for the future of Pakistan's nuclear program.

The Khan controversy opened a Pandora's Box, and all pandemonium broke lose within and outside Pakistan. It created a political commotion enough to send jitters down the country's power corridors. Not since the 1998 explosions had the country's nuclear program captured so much national and international attention from the public, the media, and the international community. The two events in Pakistan's nuclear history could, in fact, be compared for identification of commonalities and differences, which span their respective timeframes and circumstances.

The strongest—and perhaps the only—commonality between the two events was their immediate and powerful reactions from governments and publics alike. The surprise may be attributed to the element of secrecy surrounding both events, taking most by surprise. Here, however, the similarity ends. The reactions caused by Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests and those ignited by the 2003–2004 revelations have been hugely different in both nature and proportion.

The politico-strategic, economic, social, and cultural implications of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998 have been analyzed from both ends of the nuclear spectrum by proponents of weaponization as well as advocates of disarmament. In essence, the 1998 tests pushed the debate out of the "nuclear ambiguity" paradigm and into the domain of overt weaponization, closest to the zero-sum status quo of nuclear deterrence reminiscent of the Cold War years.

Compared to an abundance of traditional security discourse on the post-1998 nuclear scenario in South Asia, dissenting discourse from a nontraditional security perspective has been quantitatively less but argumentatively authoritative and no less convincing, espousing a strong case for the region's de-nuclearization. Pathbreaking studies have identified the issues and problems, and also examined public opinion.[3] There have also been a few, though acclaimed, initiatives to present the antinuclear perspective to larger audiences through the electronic media.[4] The binding thread of

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all these works is their subscription to a politics of pacifism, philosophical and political positioning against nuclear weapons which they see as detrimental to the political, social, and economic well-being of the people of South Asia.

Barring differences of country-specific factors, nearly all these studies—produced prior to the Khan affair—on the nuclear weapons of India and Pakistan share contextual approaches; they examine similar factors that inform their prognosis and prescriptions, albeit carrying some shades of philosophical and theoretical differences of opinion. Studies by Pakistani scholar-activists depict a narrower difference in methodological and conceptual approaches.

This similarity of approach and argument mainly stems from a common understanding of the geopolitical conditions prevalent in the region between May 1998 and September 2001. The factor of timing is crucial here: following the end of the Cold War, the larger international system had still not taken the shape of the present times. On the eve of the 1998 tests the global influence of military and nuclear power was considered diminished in contrast to economic, technological, and cultural factors, which had assumed increased significance. Hence the higher emphasis on developing and applying a nontraditional security paradigm for international relations, particularly in protracted conflict zones like South Asia.

However, a persistent frost in India-Pakistan relations on the question of Kashmir meant that the nuclear weapons option remained "under active consideration" in South Asia, showing little sign of receding. The questions generally examined by most of the Pakistani studies, therefore, revolved around issues of policy history and options for Pakistan (sustained nuclear ambiguity, renunciation of the nuclear option, capping the nuclear program, and overt weaponization), domestic politics, public opinion, access to information, economic and social costs, command and control concerns, international arms control and disarmament concerns, and humanitarian and environmental issues. The 1998 tests only magnified these concerns, with a heightened awareness of the role of public opinion and domestic politics in paving the way for the development of nuclear weapons in the region.

Much to the horror of peaceniks, the 1998 tests created a national sense of pride, accomplishment, strength, and defiance within the Pakistani government and the public, while causing an international scare. In stark contrast, however, the Khan controversy created a backlash of largely defensive, apologetic, retaliatory, and accusatory responses by the state, experts, political groups, the press, and sections of the general public. Matters were not helped by the condescending U.S. tone in the backdrop of Pakistan's frontline role in the war against terror; of particular irritation was India's smirking and patronizing jibes at the controversy. As opposed to 1998, the Pakistani nuclear psyche has taken a jolt in the wake of the proliferation scandal and A. Q. Khan's exit from the national nuclear scene. The nation's nuclear ego—bloated full-scale in 1998—has visibly been punctured.

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But could it also have led to an introspective sobering of attitudes, particularly from a denuclearization perspective? One can answer this question by analyzing shifts in prevailing attitudes and opinions, including those against nuclear weapons. One notes with concern that far from any increase in the marginal antinuclear sentiments existing in the country, the new responses depict complex new realities. These realities point to a predominant acceptance and adoption of traditional notions of "national security" as opposed to their critical questioning from an antinuclear position. Gaps previously existing on the subject between experts, the general public and political powers have narrowed in favor of keeping nuclear weapons. It seems that the case against nuclear weapons is decidedly becoming a distant and increasingly irrelevant idea in Pakistan.

Despite the proliferation embarrassment and security concerns caused by the Khan controversy, Pakistan's nuclear weapons now stand as an accepted and least challenged reality of the country's security apparatus. The debate has clearly entered the next stage: today it is no longer about whether or not to have nuclear weapons; rather, it is about their effective and responsible management and unthreatened possession. To the government, the political parties, the experts, and the general public, the world seems perpetually hostile and biased toward, and inconsiderate of, Pakistan's security needs—even when it is a frontline ally in an allied war.

This essay looks at the sociopolitical shifts caused by the Khan controversy and its impact on the nuclear debate in Pakistan. Locating itself in the history of the 1998 nuclear tests and responses to it, the paper examines how these have culminated into new realities in the wake of the Khan affair. In this context, it analyzes the respective roles of expert knowledge, social distance, and political power; how these have interplayed during and after the proliferation controversy; and what new attitudes they have created. Conceptually the paper relates its arguments to concerns of traditional and nontraditional security, power politics and patriotism, access to information, accountability, and peace. Finally, it discusses the possible future scenario of the nuclear issue's qualitative and quantitative thrust in Pakistan, and what it could mean for those espousing a nuclear-free South Asia.

Beyond Pokhran-II and Chaghai

The Terror Factor

It took the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on the morning of September 11, 2001, to redefine and set a new context for nuclearism and nuclearization across the world. South Asia was no exception. Both India and Pakistan were still trying to comprehend the meaning and potential of the bilateral Agra Summit (July 2001) when they were sucked into a new international system aggressively

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driven by the dynamics of the U.S. war on terror and George W. Bush's doctrine of preemptive strike.

The U.S. war on Iraq, on the pretext of nabbing that country's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), forced India and Pakistan to review their own equations—both political and military-nuclear. The contemporary India-Pakistan détente—initiated by A. B. Vajpayee's famous extension of a "hand of friendship" in Srinagar (April 2003)—had significantly altered bilateral relations between the two countries. The Composite Dialogue following the historic Islamabad Declaration (January 2004) had become what could best be described as something akin to an "institutionalization of peace" between the two countries.

But what impact could such peace initiatives have on South Asia's nuclear equation? Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik had this to say on the nuclear component of the India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue on the eve of the Khan affair's exposure:

> [The Lahore Declaration] . . . contained not one serious measure or even promise of nuclear restraint. Indeed, the agreement reached at the poorly prepared Summit, on extremely limited confidence-building (or rather, transparency) measures like informing each other beforehand of ballistic missile tests, effectively legitimized the very process of both countries' further nuclearization! On future bomb tests, the left hand took what was presumably given with the right—e.g., the moratorium on further nuclear tests in both the countries would continue unless the "national interest" dictated otherwise![5]

How true, for both countries continue to conduct their "routine" missile tests while simultaneously engaging in active multi-pronged diplomacy for peace! Clearly this is a peace that the two governments are proudly negotiating while basking in the glory of a successful nuclear deterrence. They would like their publics and the world to believe that both are responsible nuclear states, and that nuclear weapons remain prime national assets and guarantors for peace between the two countries.

Nuclear Pride

This mind-set of "nuclear pride" is well grounded in Pakistan's nuclear psychology as described by several analysts. Pervez Hoodbhoy counted it as one of the three "critically important" elements of the imperatives for the Pakistani bomb, the other two being the "nuclear shield" doctrine and military dominance of Pakistani decision making:

> Growing institutional malfunction and a feeling of collective failure have understandably led to a steadily deepening crisis for the Pakistani nation. Pride and confidence follow from real achievement; conversely absence of achievement inexorably leads to diminished self-esteem . . . More and more Pakistanis in the English language press ask what was gained from partition, although this question still cannot be asked

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> in the conservative Urdu press. The psychological anguish must somehow be made bearable. Enter the bomb.

He observed further that the Kahuta Research Laboratory (where the Pakistani nuclear program is institutionalized) has helped create a "sense of achievement" in an otherwise bleak environment, and many Pakistanis take "mental refuge within its four walls." No longer just a secret laboratory, Hoodbhoy said, it has become a "sacred symbol" which must be protected at all costs. The atomic weapons said to be produced there are "glittering objects" that symbolize mastery of the most sophisticated technology. A country that can manufacture them has presumably proved its mettle. With Kahuta, Pakistan is "safe," he noted, adding that "it cannot be pushed around, called backward, or sent to the bottom of the pecking order of nations":

> It is important to understand the extraordinary sense of desperation felt by most Pakistanis as they reel before the rapacity of political and economic elites, and see concern for the common good evaporate. Citizens have become cynical and increasingly disappointed at their historical fate, resulting in a collective loss of confidence in the state. The bomb provides to the masses a refuge from reality and an antidote to collective depression.[6]

Pakistan's Moment of Truth

Confessions

At the time when the A. Q. Khan nuclear proliferation affair became public, Pakistan was well on its way to negotiating peace with India, and receiving international accolades and financial aid for its role as a frontline ally in the U.S. war against terrorism. General Musharraf and his government highlighted ad nauseam these foreign-policy achievements to the public in efforts to garner public legitimacy and support. In this scenario of high politics and reinforcement of the traditional security paradigm—especially in the wake of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars—the notion of national security became the exclusive concern of Pakistan's military establishment, defined and applied as it deemed fit.

An effective nuclear balance with India served as the backbone of this national security doctrine, as Pakistan continued to test its ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads while talking peace across the border. Pakistan's nuclear confidence and pride was at its comfortable peak. So confident was the Musharraf government that on the eve of the then Indian premier A. B. Vajpayee's visit to Islamabad for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in January 2004, it removed a replica of Pakistan's Ghauri missile from its prominent display point in the capital city.[7]

When investigations began in late 2003 into allegations of proliferation activities of six Pakistani nuclear scientists of the Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), the

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nation viewed the "debriefing" of these scientists with confusion and suspicion. Non-attributable gossip—especially in Islamabad's elite social circles—about Khan's dubious business interests had been around for several years. But the scientist was a sacred cow, and therefore the "inside story" was not known to the general public. Before the outbreak of the proliferation scandal, Khan's most recent brush with controversy had occurred in late 2002 when he was embroiled in a legal dispute over ownership of the Institute of Behavioral Sciences (IBS) in Karachi.[8] Not until the government removed Dr. Khan from his post as adviser to the prime minister on the country's strategic program in order to "facilitate" the ongoing "investigations in a free and objective manner" did people realize the gravity of the situation. The cat was finally coming out of the bag.

With the outbreak of the Khan scandal, the nuclear equation for Pakistan changed completely. Among other things, the traditionally comparative approach vis-à-vis India could no longer be applied as comfortably as in the past. Reminiscent of global criticism and the chiding of India for its 1974 nuclear tests, this time "nuclear guilt" had come to Pakistan. In the past Pakistan had sought legitimacy for its nuclear program by pointing the finger at India and accusing it of "forcing" Pakistan to go nuclear because India had upped the ante in the regional security balance. The Khan scandal, however, provided India—and the rest of the world—a way to reproach Pakistan for its inability to handle its nuclear assets responsibly. Once again, Pakistan's nuclear program was facing tough questions about its legitimacy and viability. Ironically the Khan scandal also gave India a perfect opportunity to seek legitimacy for its own nuclear program by showing the world that it was a more "responsible" nuclear power than Pakistan—since its scientists or government had not committed proliferation crimes like Khan—and therefore deserved to be in league with the nuclear club of the world.

Nevertheless, the Pakistani government tried to dispel fears "in the strongest terms" that it would ever compromise on its nuclear capability, and asserted that "far from rollback or freeze, Pakistan would continue to undertake qualitative and, if necessary, quantitative upgrades with the objective of consolidating the national deterrence in line with its minimum deterrence needs."[9]

The next day Pakistani newspapers reported that Dr. Khan had "admitted" to having transferred nuclear technology to North Korea, Iran, and Libya during "four intense sessions of two hours each," and the National Command Authority (NCA) would "decide whether to formally charge Dr. Khan and try him in court or simply take administrative steps."[10] On 4 February 2004, in a televised address to the people of Pakistan, Dr. A. Q. Khan admitted his "error of judgment" and sought "pardon," after which he submitted a "mercy petition" to General Musharraf.

Notwithstanding the shame and regret evident in his speech, Dr. Khan's words are interestingly illustrative of his knowledge and understanding of the public psyche and pride in the country's nuclear program:

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> I am aware of the vital criticality of Pakistan's nuclear programme to our national security and the national pride and emotions which it generates in your hearts. I am also conscious that any untoward event, incident or threat to this national capability draws the greatest concern in the nation's psyche. It is in this context that the recent international events and their fallout on Pakistan have traumatized the nation.[11]

For the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, the sum total of this controversy amounted to Khan's personal fall, and not the end of the grand idea of nuclear weapons as guarantors of the country's national security or as evidence of its national progress and a source of national pride. Khan may also have banked on his televised "performance" as a check against anticipated public backlash. As national reactions reveal in the following section, his speech actually elevated his status in the public eye as a "martyr" who had willingly sacrificed his position and privileges to protect the country's security assets.

Reactions

Dr. Khan's confessions were followed by a spate of strong, yet mixed, reactions from the government, political parties, the general public, the media, and experts alike. The responses were indicative of the changes that Pakistan's nuclear psyche had undergone because of this controversy. Interestingly Khan's speech received little or no press or academic analysis for its content and delivery. Rather, most recorded reactions revealed a rush to pass moral judgment—one way or the other—on Khan's failings and to prescribe methods of damage control. Though confronting the same crisis, the Pakistani elite and the masses reacted with subtle differences. For the former, Pakistani's national security and nuclear program was now vulnerable at a crucial point in international history. For the latter, on the other hand, Pakistan's image as a proud, moral nation equipped with nuclear might was tarnished forever. But the predominant opinion held by both is that, despite the loss of national prestige, protecting the country's nuclear assets must be the nation's top priority at all costs.

To monitor and analyze their reactions, I scanned Pakistan's largest and most influential daily newspapers, the English daily *Dawn* and the Urdu daily *Jang*. *Dawn* is generally considered to be a liberal newspaper to which the country's educated elite subscribe; daily *Jang* is generally perceived as a conservative newspaper and has the largest national circulation among the popular masses of all walks of life. Narrowing my focus to February 2004, when the controversy reached its peak and ignited the highest wave of recorded reactions, I categorized the following regular newspaper sections as reflective of corresponding perspectives of certain social segments. The section "Letters to the Editor" was a measure of public opinion; opinion articles corresponded to expert knowledge; and editorials reflected media influence.

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Table 5.1
Distribution of Views by Category and Language

	Dawn	Jung
A. Letters to the Editor	**30**	**7**
a. Supportive of Khan and the Pakistani nuclear program	20	6
b. Critical of Khan but supportive of the nuclear program	4	0
c. Neutral	3	1
d. Against nuclear weapons	3	0
B. Opinion Articles	**18**	**56**
a. Supportive of Khan and the Pakistani nuclear program	5	38
b. Critical of Khan but supportive of the nuclear program	0	2
c. Neutral	4	12
d. Against nuclear weapons	9	4
C. Editorials	**7**	**5**
a. Supportive of Khan and the Pakistani nuclear program	4	2
b. Critical of Khan but supportive of the nuclear program	1	0
c. Neutral	1	1
d. Against nuclear weapons	1	2

Source: Collected by author from February 1 to February 29, 2004.

I also perused these newspapers for news items and reports on political statements and activities of political parties and interest groups concerned with the issue and its fallout. Political parties were studied as examples of how the Khan controversy influenced political power, how it was used to manipulate opinion, and for what ends and purposes. Interest groups were examined to identify indications of social assertion—or distance—on this contentious issue, and what it meant for public opinion on the nuclear weapons program.

A total of thirty-seven letters to the editor, seventy-four opinion articles, and twelve editorials specifically related to the A. Q. Khan scandal were published in the two dailies during February 2004. An analysis of all these pieces revealed multiple shades of intricately linked and sometimes self-contradictory opinions (Table 5.1).

Public Opinion

The Pakistani journalist Zubeida Mustafa dissected the very notion of public opinion and its relation to the bomb in an article published shortly after the Khan issue became public. She noted that, as the proliferation saga unfolded in Islamabad, the

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government sought shelter behind so-called public opinion, making it sacrosanct in this case, which was intriguing since usually military rulers worry least about that.[12] "The question, however, arises," wrote Mustafa, "whether the public in Pakistan at all holds an opinion on such complex issues as nuclear weapons and proliferation. And if it holds a vague opinion on the matter, can it actually be measured?"

Mustafa's observations may be valid. Nevertheless, the common people made themselves heard in various public forums on the issue of the Khan affair, notably in the form of letters to the editors of the major dailies. Even after the advent of survey polls, the world press has continued to regard the Letters to the Editor section as representative of ordinary readers' views and opinions on any particular issue. Despite their inherent lack of a scientific methodology to gauge public reaction, these letters have traditionally been considered by policy makers, intellectuals, and the press as a window into public opinion. Particularly for want of a survey in the wake of the Khan scandal, I have relied on these letters as useful tools for gaining insight into the minds and hearts of the public.

Most of the letters published in *Dawn* and *Jang* during the period under study are supportive of both Khan and the nuclear program. The views and emotions expressed in the following excerpts range from outright denial of the crisis at hand to falling back on faith in times of distress.

Far from either acknowledging the hard reality of Khan's involvement in the crime of nuclear proliferation, calling for his accountability, or showing a serious introspection about the costs of this issue for Pakistan, the dominant view in these letters reflects a scant disregard for these considerations. Instead, Khan is upheld as a "genius" who stands above the law because he is Pakistan's "saviour" and no one must hold him responsible for any wrongdoing. Those who do are themselves criticized as "traitors" and "anti-Pakistan." Patriotism is linked to calling for protection of the country's nuclear assets against global conspiracies hatched by the enemies of Islam against whom God's help is needed. Consider the following excerpts from sample letters expressing support:

> The people of Pakistan are proud of their nuclear achievement. Dr AQ Khan and his colleagues achieved "mission impossible" by setting up a uranium enrichment plant and giving the nation the much-needed nuclear deterrence and fortified its defence . . . Dr Khan, a DJ College alumnus, has celebrity status. He is the greatest genius the country has ever produced. Please stop giving a bad name to the nation's benefactors and take steps to re-establish their dignity.[13]

> To safeguard the honour and liberty of Dr. Khan, I suggest parliament should resolve that no government agency and no court of law will proceed against him and that he will enjoy permanent immunity from legal action for charges in question. The matter of granting immunity should be kept above party politics.[14]

> Today we have been forced to make ourselves accountable to such an extent that we have rounded up our defense benefactors and are questioning them . . . While it is

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> equal to a national disgrace for us, we must remember that this is part of the many challenges that the Muslim Ummah is presently facing. May God bring the Ummah out of this calamity soon.[15]

> The way the issue of nuclear scientists has been given negative coverage has harmed the national interest. It has caused a lot of pain and sadness for every patriotic Pakistani. Today, we have to protect our independence not only for ourselves but also for our future generations. But if we start bargaining on our national interests today, then who will protect us tomorrow?[16]

These views represent the largely emotional and parochial view held by most Pakistanis. It is generally believed that because the Pakistani nation is at the mercy of oppressive international powers and corrupt governments, its people can turn only to Allah for help at a time when its territorial and political integrity is threatened by Western and anti-Islam entities. The general argument is that protection of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and its "creator" is the nation's only salvation, and therefore it is every Pakistani's responsibility to safeguard this national asset at all costs.

A second category of letters were critical of Khan but supportive of the nuclear program. Criticism of Khan was mild, expressing disappointment at his "human error" of succumbing to personal greed. Elements of shock and embarrassment were more pronounced but by no means prompted a rethink over nuclear weapons and their costs. On the contrary, that was secondary to serious concerns about the safety of the nuclear program which called for urgent government measures to protect it. Although a number of such letters were published in *Dawn,* no critical letters were published in *Jang.* Consider the following sample:

> To cope with a situation like this the government and the opposition need to take a joint stand against any foreign pressure to close down our nuclear programme. The government should call a roundtable conference of all opposition parties and make it clear to the world that for Pakistan its nuclear assets are indispensable and Pakistan cannot cap its nuclear programme.[17]

The number of neutral letters (so-called because they did not express a strong view in favor or against Khan or the nuclear program letters) in both *Dawn* and *Jang* were almost even and made up only a fraction of the total number. They served more as inquiries, raising questions about an issue shrouded in mystery, while expressing concern for a confusing situation.

A small number of letters expressing opinions against nuclear weapons were published in *Dawn; Jang* carried none. Consider the following sample:

> Unhappily, one cannot escape the frightening apprehension, with all the fissile material, treaty bound or not, but bristling around us, that Tony Blair may at least once be right that to stem the movement of the world to horrific self-destruction a return to basic values may indeed be imperative. To me the first international step in this direction would be to convene the moribund Disarmament Conference at Geneva.[18]

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This illustrates that the constituency for an antinuclear perspective remains small and marginalized in Pakistan. For all its gravity, even the Khan scandal did not lead to an alternative view on these weapons. On the contrary, the numerous letters in support of the scientist and the weapons show a hardening of nuclear attitudes, never mind their disappointment. No longer necessarily defined by opinions for or against the bomb, these attitudes are located in the well-argued dominant discourse of the elite that puts nuclear weapons at the center of Pakistan's national security paradigm.

Expert Knowledge and Opinion

Standing at the lowest rung of the country's social hierarchy, the general public can only express opinions of shock, anger, humiliation, or condemnation; or, at the most, it can demand redress. In large part, the burden to explain, justify, or critically question an event falls on those who are knowledgeable and skilled at analysis. In the Khan affair, Pakistani politico-strategic and scientific experts suddenly found themselves facing a situation that had put the sanctity of the country's nuclear program in a compromising position. In the expert analyses that followed, the moral aspect was marginally addressed, relatively more so in *Jang* articles than those in *Dawn*. However, opinion articles published in the two major dailies mainly considered the political and geostrategic implications for Pakistan and what problems it could face from the international community.

Most of these expert arguments centered around questions of the West's biased approach toward nonproliferation issues, the security of Pakistan's nuclear program, its rationale, corruption, and accountability of those responsible for its management, parliamentary evaluation of the scandal, the government's handling of the crisis, and what new challenges might the government face in fending off intense international pressure. The dominant thinking and normative paradigm was that of exercising political realism. Though there were differences of perceptions on the issues involved, most analyses took the reality and acceptance of nuclear weapons as a given for Pakistan's security apparatus, the possession of which—as opposed to their governance and safety—were unquestionable. They had to be retained at all costs, no matter the sacrifice—even if it meant the shame of the "national hero." In fact, adequate governance and foolproof security became the new subject for concern and debate for most experts. Voices questioning their very existence were few and far between.

Dawn published the most opinion articles against the idea of nuclear weapons, whereas *Jang* predominantly featured articles supportive of both Khan and the nuclear program, the latter far outnumbering *Dawn*'s neutral and antinuclear articles combined. Furthermore, although *Dawn* did not feature any article critical of Dr. Khan, *Jang* did run a small number of articles that criticized Khan but supported the nuclear program. Consider the following excerpts:

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The extent of autonomy that the nuclear related organizations enjoyed in the past needs to be curtailed now by balancing with greater measure of accountability.[19]

Qadeer Khan's past activities are . . . woven into Pakistan's memory and trying to delink the two is an exercise in futility. It's also an exercise in some dishonesty for what it shows is a whole phalanx of once-eminent men scurrying for cover as the blame for a large slice of national history is shouldered by one individual.[20]

The nuclear game is beyond the means of the poor countries . . . It is therefore recommended for the poor countries like Pakistan to strictly adhere to the golden principle of "mind your business." The business in such cases is to work hard to provide the basic necessities of life to the people of their countries, and leave the luxury of going nuclear for those who can afford it.[21]

Despite the seriousness of A. Q. Khan's televised *mea culpa* and its implications for Pakistan, many people—and not just those in government—are still in deep denial. They feel Pakistan is being unfairly targeted, and moan about how other countries like Israel indulged in secret and illicit purchases to develop their nuclear weapons.[22]

Pakistan today is caught in a predicament and the only way out is its accession to [the] NPT [Nonproliferation Treaty] so that it can rehabilitate its credentials as a responsible and law-abiding member of the international community.[23]

Whatever mistake has been committed will have to be accepted. Those held responsible will have to be punished and foolproof security will have to be provided in future . . . Two things are more important than any individual: Pakistan's nuclear program that has to be saved at all costs, and Pakistan's national interest and dignity.[24]

If you are interested in ending corruption in the country then instead of targeting Dr. Qadeer Khan, first pursue those who ate the nation's resources and didn't do a dime's worth of work for the nation.[25]

This is not an ordinary case and neither is the culprit an ordinary man. This is the man about whom the nation has a united judgment that Quaid-e-Azam made Pakistan and Dr Qadeer Khan saved it. If there is any doubt in that then a referendum should be held and a verdict on this culprit should be taken from the nation . . . This is a case and decision of life and death.[26]

[Khan] gave nuclear technology to Pakistan, which shocked the developed world. His brilliance and success galvanised the Zionist and Christian lobbies and they all have become enemies of Dr. Qadeer Khan and the nuclear program . . . We are so foolish that we are giving our weaknesses to our enemies so that they attain these very objectives.[27]

[Government] should take the Parliament into confidence on the whole issue, so that the dangers facing the country and the nation could be met adequately.[28]

[The] hateful weapon that the nation had made in a condition of absolute helplessness almost became a source of idolatry for extremists. The more these people protest against Basant and Valentine's Day, with the same intensity they express their love for the atomic bomb. In a religion that was declared the religion of moderation by the Almighty, what is the capacity of hating flowers and loving bombs?[29]

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As evident in these excerpts, most views fall between open criticism of the government for exposing its weaknesses to international powers working against the interests of Pakistan and a grudging acceptance of and disappointment at Khan's stumbling. Views openly questioning the viability of nuclear weapons for a poor and troubled country like Pakistan are few. Despite the experts' perception of the negative fallout for Pakistan as a result of the Khan controversy, however, their predominant concern revolves around how best to control the damage, quickly move on from the point of embarrassment, and protect the program from future leaks or attacks.

Media Influence

A look at the editorials published in the two major dailies during this time largely depicts a national press caught between expressing bemused shock and providing advice on damage control. *Dawn* wrote the largest number of editorials supporting Khan and the nuclear program, not only compared to its number of critical or neutral editorials but also outnumbering *Jang*'s supportive editorials. *Jang*'s high score is evenly split between editorials supporting Khan and the nuclear program, on the one hand, and those critical of nuclear weapons, on the other. No editorial in *Jang* was critical of Khan but supportive of the nuclear program.

This latter pattern stands in stark contrast to the high number of pro-Khan and pro-nuclear opinion articles published in *Jang*'s editorial pages. Similarly, *Dawn*'s numerous pro-Khan and pro-nukes editorials do not correspond with the many neutral and antinuclear opinion articles published in its editorial pages. Consider the following excerpts from editorials published in both the papers:

> It is reassuring to hear from the president that there will be no rollback of Pakistan's nuclear programme. However, Islamabad must move ahead in a way that combines the dictates of security with credible guarantees against proliferation . . . What is involved is not just the fate of a few individuals but the very future of Pakistan's nuclear programme. (*Dawn*)[30]

> Proliferation of weapons only occurs when countries are locked in an arms race in an effort to gain strategic and political superiority over one another . . . Moreover, the time has come for India and Pakistan to focus on the development of their human resources. This is possible only if they reduce their exorbitant defence expenditures and channel their financial resources towards socio-economic sectors. (*Dawn*)[31]

> Circumstances demand that all those heads and concerned officials of sensitive and secret institutions should strictly be scrutinized during whose tenure the technology transfer evidence has surfaced. Because this case can temporarily be pushed under the carpet, but not forever. (*Jang*)[32]

> Spread of nuclear weapons or transfer of nuclear technology is a sensitive and dangerous issue. No one should consider himself as the ultimate authority on it, neither should one-sided statements be issued on it. Nuclear assets are assets of the whole

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> nation; therefore, the whole nation should be united for their security . . . Through our thought process and consensus we have to prove that the Pakistani nation has not made this mistake. (*Jang*)[33]

That *Dawn* mainly took a position supportive of Khan and the nuclear program is thought provoking, as is the observation that *Jang*'s editorial position is split between supportive and critical views on Khan and nuclear weapons. As noted, a traditionally held notion among our elite is that *Dawn* represents liberal and progressive politico-economic positions on issues, whereas *Jang* represents a conservative viewpoint. But our findings point to a think-shift in both major papers. It seems that even the most liberal Pakistani paper holds views not unlike the dominant elite view of supporting the Pakistani nuclear program and calling for its protection at all costs. The issue of whether it is for or against the bomb is either no longer valid or has been submerged in the larger question of safeguarding Pakistan's nuclear program from a hostile international environment.

On the other hand, *Jang*'s criticism of the lopsided global arms regime is no less surprising. Conventional antinuclear wisdom has long dubbed the conservative Urdu press as a major actor in advocating nuclearism through its hawkish positions on the India-Pakistan conflict. But our findings suggest a more globally refined editorial position adopted by *Jang* on this issue. Particularly noteworthy is the absence of emotional vitriolic or inflammatory language in its editorials on the Khan issue, even in contrast to some of its well-known columnists. Instead, *Jang*'s editorials are couched in a language of cool political realism. Unlike *Dawn,* it even moves a step further by framing the Khan issue in the larger context of the global problem of nuclear weapons and the proliferation regime, and how that hinders the progress in eliminating global poverty and world conflicts.

For the Pakistani press, these views represent important intellectual departures showing an interesting switching of roles. While the liberal English press is found conforming to the establishment's views on national security, the conservative Urdu press has adopted a more internationalist politically realist view.

Political Parties

When the Pakistan government sacked Dr. Khan from his advisory post, the action was greeted by strong discontent and disapproval by most of the country's major political parties, save the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam Group), known as the "King's Party" for its subservience to General Musharraf and his policies.[34] A report filed in *Dawn* illustrates the positions taken by several shades of political parties. According to the report, leaders of various political parties "criticized" the government's action and said that "this would cause irreparable damage to the country's integrity":

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Chairman of the PML-N Raja Zafarul Haq, in a statement, said: "Wittingly or unwittingly, under pressure, the rulers of Pakistan today are hurtling the country to a very dark end" . . . He said it was time for all political parties, irrespective of their past or views on different issues, to plan a unified action to stop the process of causing irreparable damage to the country's integrity . . . People's Party Parliamentarians (PPP) Senator Farhatullah Khan Babar said the party was of the view that scientists were being made scapegoats and the decision to remove Dr. Khan from his post of adviser strengthened this viewpoint . . . Chairman [of the] Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan . . . termed the sacking of Dr. AQ Khan the beginning of the end of the nuclear programme . . . The PTI chief alleged that under the conspiracy, the nuclear programme was being systematically destroyed by first undermining the credibility of the nuclear scientists. This would in turn lead to complete crippling of nuclear organizations thus leading to a total freeze of nuclear weapons development . . . PML-Q Senator Tariq Azeem said . . . services of Dr Khan for the country would always be remembered. He asked other political parties to keep this issue above their personal politics. He said all facts would be laid before the nation in due course of time. On the other hand, spokesman for the Communist Party of Pakistan Engineer Jameel Malik has asked the government to arrest Dr. AQ Khan and give punishment to all those responsible for transfer of nuclear technology to Iran and Libya . . . Mr. Malik asked other political and religious parties not to politicize the issue as it was a sensitive matter. He said at present over 6,000 scientists and 60,000 other staff members were working in various sensitive institutions and they had no role in the sale of nuclear technology as only a few persons were involved in this act.[35]

Consider another report published the following day in the same paper:

Politicians representing a cross section of the population have condemned the removal of the famous nuclear scientist Dr AQ Khan from the position of adviser to the prime minister on the strategic programme. Terming the step a shameful action, they said Dr. Khan was a national hero whose contribution to the defence of the country made it invincible. Senator Prof Ghafoor Ahmad, the deputy chief of Jamaat-i-Islami, said that under foreign instructions the saviour of the nation was being declared guilty. Its attitude had transformed the government into something which threatened the good name as well as the nuclear capability of the country. Prof Ghafoor demanded that before taking further steps the government should take the parliament into confidence and also present its case before the higher judiciary . . . Meraj Mohammad Khan said let the government point its fingers towards Dr Khan for alleged proliferation, links with the underworld and corruption. The people of Pakistan would never accept all this because he is their hero. Referring to the threat given by the US to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, he said if anything happens to Dr. Khan it would be another great tragedy in Pakistan's history. Speaking of the possibility that Dr. Khan will be murdered, which could be termed a suicide, Mr Khan appealed to the Supreme Court and other patriotic forces in the country to take note of the situation.[36]

The report quotes a top leader of the ultra-conservative Jamaat-e-Islami Party and veteran politicians belonging to the major liberal parties sitting in the opposition. In the following weeks these positions hardened, with the opposition parties criticizing

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the government and the ruling party justifying Khan's removal and the investigations, and also asking the opposition parties "not to politicize the issue" out of concern for preserving the national interest and unity. Of the opposition parties, the stance of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was most active: it called for a nation-wide strike "to express complete solidarity with the nuclear scientists and condemn those who had put the country's integrity at stake." MMA's top leader, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, even asked General Musharraf to leave office for taking Dr. A. Q. Khan's issue to the controversial National Security Council (NSC) instead of parliament, saying that "this step had proved that General Musharraf was not ready to go along with the constitution and the democratic system given by himself," and accusing the president of "exposing Dr. Qadeer to media trial, and assassinating the character of a great nuclear scientist."[37] Besides such political rhetoric aimed primarily against General Musharraf and the West, opposition parties also linked the issue to questions over the president's power to grant such a pardon, debate in the parliament and senate, the legal lacunae of the "pretrial" pardon, and the role of the army in proliferation activities.

Social Assertion

Another manifestation of public opinion on the Khan issue, in addition to letters to the editor discussed above, was the participation of rights and advocacy groups in the debate, bringing in a rights perspective. For instance, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) urged the government to observe due process of law during the scientists' probe:

> Saying no citizen can be treated as over and above the law of land, or seen as being exempt from its provisions, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has reiterated its demand that the scientists currently being detained be treated in accordance with the law . . . "The scientists, and indeed any other person kept in detention, must be allowed to meet their families and counsel and must be produced before courts. They must not be humiliated and must be treated with respect, like any honourable citizen of the country," the statement said. It said: "In all matters such as the current investigation that is under way, it must be noted that transparency can help remove many doubts about the nature of the action taken. The right of the people to information about the findings must not be denied. This process can also remove lingering suspicions about innocence and guilt, and set a precedent for future investigation into national issues, ending the tendency to keep them overt and shrouded from the public eye."[38]

Similarly, a newly formed Parliamentarians Commission for Human Rights (PCHR) reportedly submitted an adjournment motion to the National Assembly secretariat on detention of KRL scientists, saying "detention of the nuclear scientists had created resentment in the country, especially among professionals who now felt insecure":

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> "Disgracing of nuclear scientists in the name of debriefing is a condemnable act. Media trial of nuclear scientists has spread panic among the common man," they said. Stressing the need to handle the matter with caution, the PCHR members said the case should be discussed in the parliament so that people could become aware of the truth and taken into confidence by revealing the names of those involved in "leaking nuclear capability" to others.[39]

The legal community also played its role by reportedly observing a partial strike to express solidarity with nuclear scientists put in custody on "the pretext of debriefing," and demanding their immediate release.[40]

Such advocacy by the rights groups on a highly sensitive issue concerned with national security is unprecedented in the country's history. In the past, rights groups remained on the margins of mainstream socio-politics, as they are concerned more with leftist issues such as poverty, labor, gender, and violence. The significant change marked by the Khan episode came from the identity of the rights groups, not from the antinuclear groups, with patent differences between the two. This raises an important question: how has the rights discourse, unlike the antinuclear discourse, managed to negotiate its space in mainstream Pakistani politics?

The popularity of human rights discourse can be gauged from its effective use by an unusual social group that asserted itself during the Khan controversy. This group represented the families of the detained scientists. A news report quoted the daughter of one such scientist saying that her colleagues at college wanted to know the wrong her father had done: "She regretted that her father had used all his waking hours in making the country invincible and he got medals on his good performance. However, now the government was humiliating him."[41]

The families quickly organized themselves into interest groups and adopted the usual tactics of activist groups. They protested against the scientists' detention in front of important government buildings and press clubs; filed writ petitions in courts against detentions; called press conferences and issued press releases; liaised with political parties, parliamentarians, lawyers, and rights groups; and campaigned for the release of prominent scientists. At least two new interest groups were formed as a result of this new kind of social assertion: the Pakistan Professional Forum (PPF)[42] and Khan's Release Liaison Committee.[43] The following text of a statement issued by PPF at the end of a peaceful demonstration in Islamabad reflects a sense of sophisticated political awareness and an assertion of rights not usually associated with civilians in Pakistan:

> [The] [n]uclear programme is [an] indispensable organ of Pakistan's national security. [The] Pakistani nation, for the last three decades, has been contributing to the country's nuclear programme in the form of taxes paid to the government despite severe economic hardships. The programme has been the target of negative propaganda by the hostile countries and Western media right from its inception. The latest allegations of the nuclear proliferation are part of the same negative media

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> campaign that is designed for the purpose of depriving Pakistan of its most vital strategic asset and to force [the] Pakistani nation into subjugation.[44] According to one report, participants in the demonstration—mostly belonging to the professional class—protested against the government attitude that they said, "had sent shock waves among Pakistani intellectuals at home and abroad."[45]

The extent to which the families' reactions exposed the divisions within the national security establishment in the wake of the Khan controversy is important to consider. After all, these families have been part of the security establishment for as long as Pakistan's nuclear program has been operational. They have provided strong evidence of how the Pakistani professional class has seldom made distinctive political choices—such as being for or against the bomb—instead choosing only to protect its professional and economic interests. It becomes doubly interesting, therefore, to note that in the present environment, when the interests of this professional class are at stake, it has chosen to use the highly political rhetoric of rights for its case, knowing full well that it is taking on the very establishment that, for decades, has been its benefactor. This shows, perhaps, the coming of age of Pakistani society on the basis of increased access to information and media knowledge, on the one hand, and exposure to political advocacy by non-state actors, on the other. If they choose to, Pakistanis can use these tools to make a socio-political stand against state policies.

Whither the Antinuclear Movement?

The social landscape of Pakistan was set abuzz by the new controversy. Political parties and groups manipulated the issue as a good opportunity for social mobilization and political activism, primarily to score political points against General Musharraf. A number of organizations and groups played their role in presenting a civic perspective, showing a new form of social assertion as displayed by the families of the scientists.

But in this lively social milieu, the antinuclear movement appeared conspicuous by its near silence on the Khan controversy. Pervez Hoodbhoy wrote some articles referring to the issue, but most were analytical opinion articles, similar to those discussed earlier. In one of these articles, however, Hoodbhoy linked the Khan issue to the larger question of the value of nuclear weapons:

> Pakistan will have to put its nuclear house in order. Anything less than strict and complete accountability, regardless of rank or reputation, will leave the door open for those who may wish to try their luck, or in whom the fire of faith burns brighter. My country's loose nukes underscore a global danger that may already be out of control. Nuclear secrets will keep leaking as long as the bomb has value as a currency of power and prestige. Humanity's best chance of survival lies in creating taboos against nuclear weapons, much as those that already exist for chemical and biological weapons, and to work rapidly toward their global elimination. To do away with the bomb, bomb technology and the menace of their proliferation will require the

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> United States, as the world's only superpower, to take the lead by reducing its own nuclear arsenal, as well as dealing with all proliferators, including its ally Israel, at the same level.[46]

To a keen observer of the antinuclear weapons movement in Pakistan, it appeared that it did not address the A. Q. Khan nuclear proliferation controversy as it should have. Thus the antinuclear movement lost an important opportunity to strike home their point. In an interview published in the *News on Sunday,* I questioned the Pakistani physicist and antinuclear activist A. H. Nayyar as to whether he agreed with this observation. Disagreeing, Nayyar replied:

> The peace movement has always warned of the many dangers of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme . . . Many of these fears have been realised, including the A. Q. Khan affair. Sadly, those in power in Pakistan do not yet understand the full seriousness of the harm the nuclear programme has done to us. The peace movement has a long way to go.
>
> Many of us in the Pakistani peace and anti-nuclear movement who have followed our nuclear weapons programme closely over the past three decades were not surprised by the revelation that A. Q. Khan was running an international network selling nuclear information and technology . . . Many of us have long worried about the growing presence of radical Islamists in our society and seen it happen in the nuclear complex.[47]

Nayyar's opinion reflects an intelligent calculation about nuclearism and its politics in Pakistan but also shows the limitations that continue to confront the antinuclear weapons movement in the country. The Khan scandal brought all its previous concerns to the forefront of national politics. Yet the movement seemed at a loss on how best to assertively, effectively, and influentially place itself in its center.

Conclusion

Dr. A. Q. Khan remains a figure of intense curiosity, not least because of the Pakistani government's insistence that no one speak to him. Political implications aside, it is of note that in a span of one year of the controversy, Pakistan's nuclear program has become a source of embarrassment and concern for its people, a far cry from the great pride it generated in the past. In this essay I have tried to analyze how this transformation occurred and how various segments of the national spectrum responded to the issue. My primary concern is whether this discomfort can translate into disillusionment with nuclear weapons? Based on the data and observations presented here, one can draw some basic conclusions on the status of Pakistan's current nuclear psyche and the impact it could have on the prospects of its nuclear program and the antinuclear movement.

First, the Khan scandal has completely changed the politico-strategic equation for Pakistan's nuclear program. It has particularly affected the traditionally

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comparative approach vis-à-vis India that can no longer be applied as comfortably as in the past. As opposed to India's nuclear program, Pakistan's has become politically vulnerable to international pressure. This has generated an automatic defensive posture among its managers, who are currently busy controlling the damage. The government continuously reassures the people that it will not roll back the nuclear program.

Second, the controversy has thrown the nation into a myriad of shocked confusion and outrage at the irresponsible management of its nuclear "assets." By and large, however, the sum total of this controversy has *only* amounted to Khan's personal fall and not the end of the grand idea of nuclear weapons as guarantors of the country's national security, evidence of its national progress, and a source of national pride.

Third, the dominant thinking evident in public opinion, expert analyses, and media influence is that of accepting the reality of nuclear weapons as a given for Pakistan's security apparatus. Elite discourse, whether for or against the bomb, has remained consistent. Popular voices have joined this discourse not necessarily from reducible positions of "for or against" but from the perspective of saving Pakistan's security assets from a hostile international environment and anti-Islam/anti-Pakistan conspiracies.

However, one sees interesting think-shifts in the positions of the mainstream national press. Contrary to popular perceptions, the "liberal" English press—in this case, *Dawn*—has shown an increased conformity with the establishment's views on national security and the nuclear program. On the other hand, *Jang,* one of the leading Urdu newspapers and traditionally known for its political conservatism, shows a remarkable intellectual departure by voicing concerns about the fate of world peace in the presence of nuclear weapons and their proliferation. But one clear reality emerges out of this mix. For all these segments, the *possession* of nuclear weapons—as opposed to their governance and safety—is now largely beyond question. Voices questioning possession remain rare. The national psyche understands that weapons must be retained at all costs, no matter the sacrifice—even if it means the disgrace of the "national hero." In fact, adequate governance and foolproof security have become the new subjects for concern and debate.

Fourth, Pakistan's major political parties have manipulated the Khan issue to score political points against General Musharraf's government. For them, the Khan issue is yet another vulnerable area for the Musharraf government, an issue they want to push for creating oppositional political pressure for their own parochial interests. However, the consensus of the past remains intact on the subject of nuclear weapons, namely, that nuclear weapons are the most important asset for Pakistan's security and national integrity, and anyone compromising their status will face collective political opposition.

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Fifth, a new form of social assertion—as witnessed in the formation of groups campaigning for release of the scientists—is now operating *within* the paradigm of nuclearism while incorporating a new language of rights. This new activism accepts and propagates nuclear weapons as precious assets of Pakistan, as it campaigns to protect the people associated with their manufacture and management. Thus we see a narrowing of any previous gap between perspectives of the public, the experts, and political parties: no harm to or compromise on nuclear weapons is acceptable to Pakistani society.

Given this scenario, the kind of renewed challenges the country's antinuclear movement now faces are obvious. The national hero may have fallen, but, in so doing, he has actually become a martyr for many, which has only served to strengthen nuclearism in Pakistani society.

Notes

The source of the epigraph to this essay is Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *South Asia on a Short Fuse: Nuclear Politics and the Future of Global Disarmament* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–2. The contents of this essay are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization she currently works for.

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6

THE POLITICS OF DEATH: THE ANTINUCLEAR IMAGINARY IN INDIA

Srirupa Roy

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It is one of those cases where the art of the reasoner should be used rather for the sifting of details than for the acquiring of fresh evidence. The tragedy has been so uncommon, so complete and of such personal importance to so many people, that we are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis. The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists and reporters. Then, having established ourselves upon this sound basis, it is our duty to see what inferences may be drawn and what are the special points upon which the whole mystery turns . . .

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime."

"The dog did nothing in the nighttime."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Arthur Conan Doyle, "Silver Blaze," in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes,* 1892

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Why has there been no significant antinuclear movement in India? Like Conan Doyle, my attempt to answer this question foregoes the search for "fresh evidence" such as surveys on public attitudes toward the bomb, ethnographies of existing antinuclear movements, or analysis of media coverage of nuclear politics and India-Pakistan relations. I settle instead for the more limited task of simply (re)"sifting the details" of the mystery at hand. In what follows, I focus on one particular detail of the antinuclear movement, what we might call its "apocalyptic imaginary" or the rhetoric of mass death and destruction that antinuclear groups in South Asia have advanced in attempting to mobilize citizens of India and Pakistan since the nuclear tests of 1998.

The foundational premise of an antinuclear movement is a commitment to prevent mass annihilation. Toward this end, they reproduce cautionary specters of mass death and destruction that contrast markedly with the promise of life that has energized all modern political ideologies and social movements, including the nationalists' natalist fantasies and the socialists' utopian desires, the religious traditionalists' conservationist efforts and the liberals' guarantee of individual protection.[1] I argue here that the antinuclear symbolic repertoire of mass death and destruction does not have a radical political charge within the existing ideological terrain in postcolonial India; that (and to mix metaphors) the attempt to center a transformative politics on idioms and images of mass death and destruction is *necessarily* doomed.

The "curious incident" I investigate in this essay is, accordingly, the political limitations of mass death narratives in late modern India. What explains these limitations? What are the theoretical and political-ethical lessons to be learned from investigating the limits of dystopian and apocalyptic narratives? These questions inform this chapter, and, in addressing them, I carry forward the overarching theme of this volume, which is understanding South Asian nuclearization through the lens of socio-cultural and historical analysis. A counterpart to the examination of "how we have come to love the bomb," or the complex constellation of national fears and longings that underpin the nuclear testing decision of 1998, this essay explores the contours of the antinuclear imagination and asks whether, how, and why we have come to hate the bomb.

The notion of a transformative politics requires elaboration. Social movements are instances of collective action undertaken to bring about significant social and political change.[2] They are ideologically quite varied; for instance, a social movement inspired by Hindu nationalist ideology clearly subscribes to a very different vision of social and political transformation compared to a left social movement.[3] Despite these ideological variations, they all share a common goal of achieving substantial sociopolitical transformation and a common mobilizational strategy based on radical critique or a thoroughgoing interrogation of the existing sociopolitical order through what I call a "politics of anger." I contend that mass death narratives are unable to elicit and harness such a radical or transformative politics, and thus they cannot facilitate the emergence of a social movement. To use the language of social movement theory, the

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apocalyptic imaginary invoked and sustained by narratives of mass death has not led to an effective "injustice frame" or fostered an effective "insurgent consciousness."[4]

In focusing on the apocalyptic imaginary as the key to the puzzle of why a sustained antinuclear movement has not emerged in India, I subscribe to the school of social movement theory which holds that collective action of any kind can only be understood by exploring the symbolic-cultural landscapes within which individuals and groups act (or fail to act). From this perspective, the very notions of "action" and "movement" require us to engage with more than the macro-structural variables that shape social movements. Thus accounts of mass deprivation or transformations in political opportunity structures are only partial explanations for why social movements emerge at particular moments in time. The political resources and opportunities available to social movements are integral to an explanation but they do not exhaust the explanatory factors. Also required is an investigation of how social and cultural meaning is produced by individuals and groups. Analytical attention must be directed toward practices of meaning making—the particular "cultures of protest" and "symbolic repertoires" that are produced by social movements,[5] and to how these symbolic and cultural interventions relate to or resonate within the wider field of public culture. This calls for an exploration of the particular symbolic-cultural imaginary elaborated by a social movement and the field of engagement, or the symbolic-cultural landscape of contemporary public life. The following sections take up this task.

The first section locates the apocalyptic imaginary of the antinuclear movement within the new alignments of order and opposition that were formed in the aftermath of the nuclear tests of 1998. I show how the reconfiguration of India as a nuclear weapons state created new opportunities, as well as new political burdens, for the antinuclear movement, and I examine the different vocabularies of antinuclear protest that emerged in this context. The second section situates the apocalyptic imaginary within the wider field of postcolonial public culture. I examine the proliferation of mass death narratives around events and issues unrelated to nuclearization, and I argue that the imaginary of nuclear destruction is refracted through these depoliticized, even "anti-political," narrative lenses. The essay concludes with a consideration of whether, and how, an alternative antinuclear imagination might emerge.

Order and Opposition in Nuclear India

New Political Orders

The formal announcement of India's successful testing of the nuclear bomb on May 11, 1998, and Pakistan's declaration of a similar test a few days later, marked a significant disjuncture in South Asia's material and symbolic-ideational engagement with the nuclear bomb. The formal-legal shift from an antinuclear policy to a pro–nuclear weapon

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policy stance, and the structural realignments in the character of state authority in both India and Pakistan as a result of the unfettered ascendancy of "national security" as the dominant vocabulary of governance after May 1998,[6] also had counterparts in the realms of public culture and political discourse. The long-standing official moral condemnation of nuclear weapons in the first few decades after independence, and the more prevaricating stance of "nuclear ambiguity" that had characterized establishment discourses following the "peaceful nuclear explosion" under the Indira Gandhi regime in 1974 were now supplanted by a very different set of laudatory discursive constellations.

Starting in the summer of 1998, competing imaginaries of nuclear India as both a feared dystopia and a desired utopia would jostle for recognition in public cultural landscapes and media worlds, as the moral condemnation of nuclear weapons was joined by its opposite: exuberant proclamations of nuclear pride. A new set of triumphalist-celebratory representational repertoires[7] now emerged around the nuclear bomb, from Bal Thackeray's infamous declaration, "We have to prove that we are not eunuchs," to reports that Hindu nationalists were distributing sweets to celebrate the achievement of the tests, to the proud comments of bureaucrats, scientists, and civilians about India's new identity as a global player that led the writer Amitav Ghosh to conclude that India's nuclear bomb was the product of a "status-driven," not a "threat-driven," quest.

At stake here was not simply the novelty of these positive commentaries on the bomb, nor the resulting reconfiguration of the national imagination around the achievement of what state elites had denounced just a few decades earlier for economic, strategic, and moral-humanist reasons. Of significance as well were the transformed meanings, and the qualitatively different kind of affective-political work that negative and dystopian imaginaries of nuclear weapons and technologies had to undertake after May 1998.

As noted above, the denunciation of state efforts to possess nuclear weapons as immoral and illegitimate had been an enduring trope of postcolonial political discourse. Following independence, Gandhi's emphatic and unambiguous opposition to nuclear science and technology (and, in fact, to modern science and technology in general) was modified by Nehru's concession to the possibility that certain situations justified, even necessitated, the acquisition and use of nuclear technology, particularly if it could further the development of the newly sovereign nation-state.[8] This exemption did not apply, however, to military uses. The state's possession of nuclear weapons continued to be the target of moral-legal opprobrium, although this sanction against the present acquisition of nuclear weapons did not rule out the possibility of their acquisition or use in the future.[9]

The existence of such oppositional discourses about nuclear weapons was not itself a remarkable or distinctive phenomenon. After all, vocabularies of antinuclear

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protest were an integral part of social movement repertoires in many contemporary nation-states, particularly in those that already possessed nuclear weapons.[10] What distinguished postcolonial antinuclear discourses prior to the 1998 tests was their intimate relationship with state power, namely that the critique and condemnation of nuclear weapons was intrinsic to the language of governance in postcolonial India.

Nehru's emphatic condemnations of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, Indira Gandhi's reassurance that the 1974 nuclear test was not at all connected with the ultimate evil of weaponization,[11] and, as recently as 1998, foreign policy officials' public endorsement of global nuclear disarmament—these are only a few examples of the tireless, repetitious statist disavowal of nuclearization in bureaucratic and policy circles throughout the half-century of independent India's existence, even though the official antinuclear mantra might have been disingenuous and ultimately hollow.

The transformation of this statist character of the antinuclear imagination in the post-1998 period, and the subsequent relocation of antinuclear discourses from the domain of state power to that of social protest amounted to the most politically consequential shift in the public cultural landscape of post-Pokhran II India. The dystopian imaginations of nuclear worlds were now radically disengaged from, and in fact deployed *against,* state institutions and government regimes. This meant that after May 1998 the antinuclear imagination had to harness two very different affective registers. The current impasse of antinuclear politics may be traced to the difficulties of this affective negotiation, as I explain below.

In the first instance, the task at hand was a continuation of the earlier effort to convey the sense of horror, despair, and disbelief over the enormity of the mass destruction that would result from a nuclear bomb. But where such a *politics of horror* was the only goal of the pre-1998 state-authorized antinuclear imaginary, a second and equally pressing imperative emerged once antinuclear vocabularies were decommissioned or dissociated from state power.

With the condemnation of nuclear weapons now serving as an expression of dissent rather than consent vis-à-vis the existing regime and the political status quo, antinuclear discourses were invested with an additional and radical charge, namely, a *politics of anger.* Henceforth the antinuclear imagination would have to respond to both these imperatives—to elicit the chilling, numbing, and paralytic horror that leads to moral revulsion and condemnation of nuclear weapons, and also the outrage that can lead to a purposive and concerted struggle against the illegitimate and undemocratic actions of the state.

Could this be achieved? To what extent did the antinuclear imagination in the wake of the 1998 tests respond to the new imperative of a politics of anger—a response that would have entailed modifying and even supplanting existing antinuclear lexicons of horror and moral condemnation?

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Antinuclear Imaginaries

In recognition of the multiple stakeholders and arenas of late-modern politics, opposition to the 1998 tests took different forms addressed to diverse audiences. Protest and resistance were expressed through the familiar institutional routes and corporatist structures of civil society, such as political parties, trade unions, professional associations, and civic groups, and through decentralized insurgencies of political society and spontaneous mass action engendered by new social movements.[12] At once reaffirming and transcending the state's presentation of nuclearization as a nationally specific phenomenon (the bomb as the site and means for asserting a new definition of national identity), antinuclear activists addressed domestic audiences as well as international intergovernmental and nongovernmental constituencies. Alliances were forged both with global social movements of nuclear prevention and disarmament, and with local/national cultures of protest around issues as varied as environmental degradation, indigenous rights, popular science education, social and economic justice, secularism, and South Asian regional peace.[13]

This diversity would split the antinuclear opposition, so that the Pokhran tests would be criticized differently by left parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Gandhian social movements such as the National Alliance of People's Movements, but several common clusters of antinuclear discourses and symbolic repertoires also emerged, each facilitating a distinctive strategy of political mobilization and opposition.

Initially *public good arguments* of antinuclear campaigns drew attention to the considerable social opportunity costs of nuclear weaponization. As the pithy text of a placard at an antinuclear protest in Delhi on Hiroshima Day in 1998 expressed it: "No Water, No Electricity, No Jobs, No Problem: We Have the Bomb!" The antinuclear arguments in the pamphlet, "The Buddha Would Not Have Smiled," that was distributed in the course of a public rally in Delhi on May 16, 1998, was another example of such reasoning:

> The process by which this decision was taken has been secretive and clearly undemocratic, and once again, the priorities of common people have been set aside for spurious considerations. In different parts of our country, people are struggling against poverty and deprivation, while so-called development projects displace millions of toiling people. The diversion of resources to a mutually destructive arms race on the subcontinent is insane, unjust and inhuman.[14]

As the above quote indicates, the trade-off between human security and national security was a primary focus of public educational campaigns. Campaign material highlighted the interested/selective rather than disinterested/neutral provenances of nuclear weapons policy, that this was a policy choice driven by narrow elite interests rather than by considerations of the "greater common good." When viewed against

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the backdrop of the considerable social and economic inequality that pervaded the subcontinent, and the fact that millions of citizens were presently denied access to basic essentials of life such as safe and adequate drinking water, shelter, education, and sanitation, the folly of investing state resources in the development and acquisition of nuclear capability was especially pronounced.

Further, this trade-off between national security and human security was described to be a zero-sum game. For instance, at a public demonstration on Calcutta's College Street immediately after the Indian nuclear tests, protestors "raised slogans demanding that the social issues like education, food, clothing, shelter should be given priority over the N-bombs. Comparing the cost of each Hydrogen Bomb they claimed that at least two lakhs [*sic*] primary schools can be set up or six hundred poor children can have one-time meals against the cost of a single H-bomb."[15] Such arguments emphasized the considerable opportunity costs of nuclearization. It was not just that national security expenditures took precedence over human security expenditures, but that every rupee spent on the nuclear project effectively reduced social spending. By questioning the existing priorities in state expenditures, the debate over nuclearization versus the public good brought the issue of the state's democratic accountability and legitimacy into the political-cultural arena. For the opponents of nuclear policy, the state's decision to engage in nuclearization violated the first principles of democratic governance: to oppose nuclear weapons was to indict the state for its unrepresentative, even illegitimate, policies and its manifest failure to secure the lives of its citizens.

Arguments about national history and ideology animated additional antinuclear campaigns. Here, the emphasis was on the fact that the nuclear tests were a departure from India's proclaimed commitment to normative principles of nonviolence and pacifism. References to Gandhian ideals, Nehru's rejection of nuclear weapons, and the loss of India's "moral stature" in the international community were the mainstay of this line of reasoning. The following extract from a press statement issued by the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), a Gandhian umbrella organization representing local social movements from all across India, illustrates the logic of presenting the nuclear tests as a radical break in the otherwise pacifist course of Indian national history:

> After Independence, India has taken a principled stand against nuclear weapons and general militarization of the globe. India's moral and political power in international politics was largely dependent upon such principled stand and pursuit of a new international economic and political order. This stand has been paying short term and immediate dividends to our country in the international community. All along these years, [the] international community has been taking the Indian view seriously and has mostly adopted a tough posture towards the tantrums by Pakistan. That apart, India has forfeited the opportunity and historical responsibility to lead the march towards a more humane, peaceful world. We too have become . . . part of the Global Market of Military-Industrial complex.[16]

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Attention was also directed at the ideological motivations and implications of the nuclear tests which, according to Hindutva ideology, were yet another example of the radical reconfiguration of Nehruvian secularist India. From this perspective, the opposition to nuclear weapons was a key and necessary component of a larger and ongoing ideological and political battle against the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism in the postcolonial polity.

Strategic-realist arguments against nuclearization constituted a third strand of antinuclear opposition. In contrast to efforts to link antinuclear opposition to broader national political and social movements that worked toward other goals unrelated to nuclearization, such as social and economic justice or the defeat of Hindu nationalism, these oppositional discourses addressed official nuclear weapons policy on its "own" terms. Whether through countering official claims about the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in securing strategic goals, or by establishing that India's effort at "nuclear blackmail" would not impact the existing hierarchies of power, antinuclear activists harnessed the strategic-realist idioms of nuclear scientists, bureaucrats, and foreign policy experts to argue against nuclearization. Although this form of argument was most commonly found in editorial comments by nuclear policy and strategic studies experts opposed to nuclear tests (for example, the Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Kanti Bajpai, the retired naval admiral Laxminarayan Ramdas, and the journalist-activists Achin Vanaik and Praful Bidwai), it was also endorsed by activist organizations such as the Delhi-based Parmanu Bomb Virodhi Andolan (PBVA):

> The earlier stand that the tests are meant to be a deterrent has proved to be false. We now fear that when the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] says that its nuclear policy stands vindicated they will use the excuse of the Pakistani tests to induct and deploy nuclear warheads, This will only lead to the escalation of tensions and the beginning of a nuclear arms race that no one can afford.[17]

Finally, a dominant theme was what I referred to earlier as the *apocalyptic imaginary,* or the specter of the mass destruction that would inevitably result from a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. The South Asian reproduction of this mid-century antinuclear leitmotif from Europe and the United States, with distinctly Judeo-Christian eschatological resonances, was not simply a modular replication or a mimetic replay of a "derivative discourse," to borrow Partha Chatterjee's leading phrase.[18] The nuclear nightmares haunting "our modernity" both mirrored and departed from the dystopias of nuclear Armageddon that had haunted public culture and political discourse in other parts of the world since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.[19]

For instance, the chilling descriptions of the enormity of death and destruction that would surely result in the event of "bombing Bombay,"[20] or Amitav Ghosh's somber remapping of the ruins of Lutyens' Delhi in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster,[21] echoed the dark scenarios of Cold War nuclear dystopias and reproduced several

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of the iconic visions and metaphors commonly associated with nuclear death and destruction: the mushroom cloud, the death of time, the unbearable brightness of a "thousand suns."[22]

The political charge of these dystopian visions, however, reflected the unique imperatives of the postcolonial context. Thus, unlike the literary-aesthetic contours of Western nuclear horrors, Indian Armageddon had a resolutely scientific lineage. The frightening visions of the end of the world were unadorned by rhetorical excess and were presented instead in the methodical and measured language of scientific research.

Deliberately designed to be transformative interventions that could effectively question establishment certitudes, these chilling scenarios of nuclear devastation pitted careful scientific calculations against the scientific bombast of the state. A paradigmatic example of this is the "Bombing Bombay" report, produced by the physicist and antinuclear activist M. V. Ramana, which presented meticulous scientific calculations of the death and destruction that would follow a nuclear attack on Bombay. In contrast to the "artistic" approach of the West in its engagements with the nuclear imagination, where mostly novelists, poets, filmmakers, and artists invoke specters of mass destruction to dismantle the pretensions of nuclear science, in South Asia it was scientists who advanced conflagrationist visions of nuclear destruction: modernity's excesses called into question by archetypical modernists themselves.

Apart from their rational-scientific constitution, nuclear dystopias failed to resonate politically as a result of several other symbolic and affective features related to the eventual political non-resonance of this imaginary. To begin with, they were highly abstract. As the "Bombing Bombay" report clearly illustrated, the nuclear apocalypse was effectively a thought experiment: a "what if" series of events, in this case a scientific simulation or set of mathematical predictions. Although descriptions of what would happen during and after a nuclear explosion were horrific, the scenarios were strangely unreal in that the highly technical and totalizing imagery of nuclear destruction did not convey the individual and visceral phenomenology of pain and suffering attending the "mortification of the body."[23] Their effect was more metaphysical than somatic, with the experience of death and destruction temporally and spatially distanced from the immediate present. The eventual end of the world, and not the dangers and inequities of the here-and-now, was the focus.

Second, and related to this effect of distancing, was that, as in all doomsday prophesies, the postponement of disaster in the apocalyptic imagination had the unintended effect of deflecting attention from the urgent need for political action in the present. The implicit teleological determinism of nuclear dystopias—the emphasis on the inevitability of mass destruction in a nuclear age—also contributed to this effect. A telling comment by a citizen at an antinuclear rally in Delhi in May 1998 captures this effect all too well. "We are suffering and dying every day," noted the pedestrian, bemused and perhaps also annoyed by the traffic-stopping exertions of anti-nuclear

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activists at a busy street corner in the city. "A nuclear bomb will kill us all together one day, at the same time. So what's the difference?"[24]

Third, the heightened prominence of visibility, spectacle, and scale in these conflagrationist imaginaries, whose affective charge was based on the horrific sight and enormity of nuclear destruction, effectively foreclosed political action directed against the everyday, invisible, and structural inequities of power. The iconic representation of the mushroom cloud that circulated in pamphlets, posters, and other print material, along with the grainy, black-and-white images of a Hiroshima in ruins that haunted the cinematic productions of antinuclear activists, were undoubtedly chilling in their depiction. At the same time, however, the very enormity of destruction conveyed by these visual representations—for, indeed, it was the apparent, demonstrable, and visible quality of nuclear devastation to which they repeatedly drew attention—constituted the violence of nuclearization in exceptional terms, considerably removed in scale, scope, and intensity from the structural violence of "normal" politics-as-usual in South Asia. In the "apocalyptic imagination," as the term itself implies, the object of contemplation was the sociopolitical exception or the aberration of the once-in-a-lifetime nuclear apocalypse; the default or benchmark condition of the political norm did not fall under equivalent critical scrutiny.

With all this, the abstract, deferred, determinist, and spectacular constitution of the antinuclear movement's imagination of mass death and destruction had a constraining effect on the exercise of transformative political action in the present. Although it effectively elicited a "politics of horror," providing moving and compelling evidence about the totalizing devastation that a nuclear bomb would surely cause, it failed to enable the emergence of a "politics of anger" that could translate this moral shock and horror into a purposive struggle against the peremptory and undemocratic actions of a national security state.

An analysis of the internal logic and symbolic structure of the antinuclear imaginary, however, can only provide a partial explanation for its political effect. A comprehensive understanding requires investigation of the larger material and discursive universe within which it circulates, and the existing narrative frameworks and "theodicies" or rationalizations of suffering, death, and destruction that refract and modulate the idioms and images of Kali Yuga.[25] The following section addresses this task.

Mass Death Narratives in Postcolonial India

The apocalyptic imaginaries of the antinuclear movement do not exist in isolation but are refracted through other specters of mass death that saturate contemporary public culture. Since its inception, the antinuclear imagination has had to negotiate a dense representational terrain saturated with images, texts, historical experiences, public memories, institutional structures, and policy regimes about mass death. At least three different specters of mass death have haunted the postcolonial political-cultural field

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over the past fifty years, each structuring the public imagination in a distinctive way. Let us examine these in detail.

The first is the considerable death toll resulting from cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and other "natural disasters." The physical occurrence of natural disaster deaths is universal and random, as they can happen anytime, anywhere, to anyone, leveling prosperous urban populations in industrialized nations as well as impoverished fishing communities in the developing world.[26] However, the representational grammars that translate these lived experiences of death, destruction, pain, and suffering into a socially intelligible category of "natural disaster deaths" vary considerably across cultural and historical contexts, as do the repertoires of responses such deaths elicit—whether institutional, moral, or aesthetic.[27]

In postcolonial India the dominant understanding of mass deaths caused by natural disasters is that, in fact, they are sudden or unforeseen, aberrant, and unrelated to any form of human, social, cultural, or political agency. Unlike the politicized bodies of those who died in a riot, where death is inevitably an event of social, communal, and national significance, the most memorable feature of the lives felled by a "random act of God" is their political innocence and purity.

As Hendrik Hertzberg acidly observed in explaining the astonishing levels of global concern, sympathy, and grief over the death and devastation of the Asian tsunami disaster of December 2004, the "tsunami has no politics."[28] This aptly captures the pervasive tendency to represent natural disaster deaths as universal-human rather than socially or politically circumscribed tragedies. The peculiar quality of the "simple," "bare," or "unqualified" death that results from natural disasters can be extended to other events as well that, unlike the global spectacle of the tsunami, have remained within national frames of significance.

Thus, long before the tsunami crashed to shore, media reports and legislative discussions about the Andhra cyclone of 1977 and the West Bengal floods of 1978[29] were framed in virtually identical terms, with the horror of the death toll established through repeated assertions about the hapless innocence of the victims. More recently, the narratives of mass death in the context of the Gujarat earthquake of January 2001 provide another telling example of this practice of mourning "nonpolitical" mass deaths following natural disasters.

The depoliticized imagination of the Gujarat earthquake becomes all the more evident if we compare it to representations of another kind of mass death that took place in the same state a short while later, when at least three thousand people were killed during the anti-Muslim pogrom of March 2002. The universal humanity of the dead in the former case contrasts sharply with the communalized extinction of the latter, as the "human" corpse and the "Muslim" corpse are witnessed and mourned in very different ways.

The Gujarat earthquake victim, like the tsunami victim, was raised as a subject of general and unqualified empathy. The savagely mutilated bodies from Modi's Gujarat,

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like the Iraqi war dead or the torture victims in Abu Ghraib prison, were caught in the fury of ideological partisanship and subjected to the calculus of "deserved" and "undeserved" death, deaths to minimize and deaths to mourn. Initially, this differential valuation of dead bodies was even the subject of state policy, as Hindu victims of the Godhra "terrorist" attack were promised the sum of Rs.200,000 as ex-gratia compensation, whereas Muslim "riot victims" were offered exactly half that amount.

In sum, narratives and representations of mass disaster death in India have the effect of naturalizing and depoliticizing death. They depict mass death as an externality, thus disallowing questions of agency and culpability, institutional accountability, and democratic responsibility.

Riot victims are the subject of the second major narrative of mass death in postcolonial India, namely, that of "riot deaths." Like the discourses surrounding natural disaster deaths, these are produced by a range of both state and non-state (media and civil society) actors.

Official representations of riot deaths are governed by familiar narrative-symbolic conventions shaped by the legacy of colonial rule.[30] The exceptionalism of these deaths—the riot as a discrete eruption—is a ubiquitous trope. The metaphor of riots as tinderboxes that burst into flames, accompanied by descriptions of the chaos, confusion, and general social and moral panic and dissolution that prevails when things fall apart all of a sudden, are but some of the ways in which the discrete drama of the riot has been conveyed. Similar to the representation of natural disasters, riots are thus also represented as events that can be located within a bounded space and time. There is always a then and there for a riot, and, conversely, times and spaces that are declared to be riot-free.[31]

The other metaphor commonly evoked in official representations of riot deaths is apposite as well: the riot as the visible symptom of a disease plaguing the body politic reconstitutes the meaning of a riot in significant ways. The riot as a mysterious disease that "strikes" and "infects" society naturalizes what is actually a complex social process shaped by the interplay of human agency and socio-historical structures. The frequently invoked "virus of communalism" furthers this naturalizing logic, as the spread of a riot from one locale to another is seen to occur naturally. Riots are like diseases, the argument goes, and will run their infectious course.

Paradoxically, although riot pathologies have a naturalizing effect, they also authorize the agency and efficacy of institutional intervention. As Paul Brass pointed out in his provocative examination of dominant riot "texts" in postcolonial India, official discourses about riot pathologies hold out the hope that, like diseases, riots can be "cured"—that their contagious effect can indeed be kept at bay by the ministrations of experts, that it may even be possible to prevent riot deaths by "inoculating" society against future outbreaks.[32]

With these discourses of prevention, riot death narratives authorize the managerial interventions of the state. Indeed, as Thomas Hansen has noted, although

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commonly characterized as a momentary social and political collapse, a riot is, in fact, the (literal) site upon which the "myth of the state" is resurrected and its bureaucratic, legal, policy, and disciplinary powers are put on display.[33]

The official representation of a riot inevitably represents the state as the authoritative problem solver: the neutral, objective, and "sublime" institutional entity that comes to the aid of individual victims and of the nation as a whole in the aftermath of a riot.[34] Charges of state complicity, or the long-standing inequities and discriminatory policies that caused the riot, are inadmissible. Instead, the political imaginary of riot deaths locates the cause in "social evils" such as communalism, which can be eradicated by "better and more" intervention[35] rather than a critical questioning of state power.

Riot death narratives "foreclose multiplicity,"[36] replacing the complex and context-specific reasons for mass violence with a simplistic and invariant account of how "communal mind-sets" are manipulated by "power-hungry politicians" and "antisocial elements." Not only does such an explanation absolve the state of involvement and responsibility, it also endorses an explicitly anti-political stance. Thus, in the wake of riots, laments about the "dangers" and "evils" of political life and action dominate official discourse.

Ever since the Jabalpur riot of 1961—codified in state and academic circles as the first major riot after independence—citizens have been exhorted to transcend politics and return to the harmonious truths of Indian culture and history. The task at hand is not political organization and the assertion of transformative political agency but "recuperating" the ethos of intercommunal harmony and emulating the folk syncretisms practiced by communities that have "resisted the temptations" of modern politics. The haunting image of the riot dead thus turns us toward the nostalgic utopias and "golden ages" of history and myth, away from the risks and uncertainties of political engagement in the present.

The examination thus far has focused on state-produced narratives of riot deaths, such as the reports of official commissions of inquiry, parliamentary debates, police reports, and judicial decisions. As instances of "state propaganda," their failure to investigate state complicity in riot deaths is only to be expected. What is surprising, instead, is that narratives about riots produced by a variety of non-state actors are also shaped in similar ways. Thus, as Brass's investigation of the different riot texts in postcolonial India has established, reports in the independent print media have shored up the official truth on riots by reproducing the naturalizing, depoliticizing thesis of the "communal virus" and its spread.[37] And although civil society organizations have made concerted efforts to draw attention to the complicity of state actors and structures in riots, the primary long-term solution for preventing future riot deaths is the familiar call to "transcend politics" and return to the norms and ethos of peaceful coexistence that forms the "authentic" core of Indian culture.[38] Even in instances when civil activism targets state actors, the indictment in most cases is of the particular governing party (e.g., the Congress in the case of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984; and the BJP and

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Sangh Parivar in the case of anti-Muslim riots after 1990) rather than the underlying structures of state power.[39]

Do narratives about mass deaths caused by industrial and technological accidents offer a different understanding of causality, institutional responsibility, and politics? Does the ability to identify a definite, named agent of mass death—for example, Union Carbide, Northern Railways, and Ansal Properties (the Delhi corporation that owned Uphaar Cinema, the site of a massive fire in 1997)—shift the representational terrain and enable the emergence of new political and ethical visions and practices? By way of answering these questions about the third major mass death narrative that has an enduring presence in postcolonial India, let us briefly consider the symbolic and material terrain of a paradigmatic industrial accident, the "Bhopal tragedy" of 1984.

On December 3, 1984, at least two thousand residents of Bhopal were killed by the accidental release of lethal methyl isocyanate gas from a pesticide plant. Foreshadowing the "instant death and endless devastation" scenarios of the antinuclear imaginary, even larger numbers suffered protracted illnesses, foreshortened life spans, and the loss of livelihood and economic security in the years to come.[40] The Bhopal disaster attracted considerable national and global media attention in the immediate period after the accident.[41] Even after the media spotlight moved on, the Bhopal tragedy continued to circulate in the public domain as a result of the legal and judicial actions undertaken by the Indian state over the following decade, and the activism of advocacy groups and victims-survivors groups in Bhopal such as the Gas Peedith Mahila Udyog Sangathan.[42]

These narratives of social suffering, as already noted, diverged from existing vocabularies of natural disaster deaths and riot deaths. Unlike the naturalized provenance of those types of events, the mass deaths in Bhopal were linked to the actions and decisions of one identifiable agent—Union Carbide, the corporation that owned and administered the industrial plant. This assignment of corporate responsibility meant that responses to the Bhopal disaster swiftly moved into the litigation arena, as post-disaster efforts involved not only relief and rehabilitation but the quest for punitive justice as well.

Another significant difference was the import assigned to the Bhopal deaths. With the passage of the Bhopal Act of 1989, the Indian government effectively nationalized the Bhopal disaster. Riot deaths were described in local terms, mapped onto specific urban spaces and memorialized as, for example, the "Ahmedabad riots" or, even more specifically, as "the violence at the Gulbarg housing complex." Bhopal, in contrast, was resignified as an *Indian* tragedy, pitting the Indian state, as the self-appointed legal guardian of the Bhopal victims—the infamous *parens patriae* government-as-parent clause—against an American corporation.

But even as the nationalization of the Bhopal disaster and the dominance of legal and medical relief and rehabilitation efforts set it apart from the usual responses to natural disaster deaths and riot deaths, the "state effect" of mass death narratives was

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preserved.[43] In fact, judicial-legal representations of Bhopal authorized the managerial interventions of the state with special vigor.

For instance, the view that mass death and destruction could be compensated, and that a "full and final settlement" for the Bhopal disaster was possible, consolidated social relations around the tutelary powers of the "guardian state," the definitive problem solver of the nation and its citizens. Moreover, as Kim Fortun, Ravi Rajan, and Veena Das pointed out in their critical investigation of the bureaucratic-legal discourses about Bhopal, the conflation of "justice" with financial compensation from Union Carbide, and the related assertion of an "end of suffering" once the legal battle was over and the monies awarded, disembedded the Bhopal disaster from a wider historical and social context of causes and implications.[44]

The varied forms and expressions of violence and injustice that led up to and followed Bhopal were elided in the dominant narrative that Union Carbide was the sole author of the disaster, and of that the disaster itself was confined to the dark night of December 3, 1984. The alliance between state and global capital, and the deals struck in the political marketplace that had allowed Union Carbide to repeatedly violate land-use and environmental safety regulations; the stark polarizations in the city that mapped suffering along class lines (an overwhelming proportion of the victims were those who lived in makeshift housing in poorer areas close to the plant); and, finally, the unintended ways in which concerned civil society organizations transformed the lived experience of pain into an abstract "categorical politics" of compensation for "victims"[45] put in place a rationalization of death and suffering that blunted the radical charge of a politics of anger.[46]

Conclusion

In keeping with the theme of this volume, that South Asian nuclearization requires a socio-cultural framework of explanation, this chapter has explored the symbolic landscapes of antinuclear protest in India. I have addressed the question of why an antinuclear movement has failed to take root in any sustained sense in India, and, by extension, the more general problem of how and why social movements emerge (or fail to emerge). Specifically I focused on one piece of the puzzle, namely, the political-cultural arenas or "fields" of discourse and ideology to which the antinuclear movement relates. I argued that although "opposition" may be common to all strands of antinuclear discourse, only certain kinds of oppositional discourse energize transformative social and political action. My contention here is that specters of mass death and destruction do not have a significant actional charge in postcolonial India. As the preceding sections have shown, the idioms and images of mass death that structure the ideological-political field horrify, shock, and sadden but do not anger. They reject the possibility that death from natural disasters and riots can be linked to the inequities of state structures, policies, and ideological practices. This forecloses the opportunity

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